

University of Warwick institutional repository: <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap>

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of Warwick

<http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap/34740>

This thesis is made available online and is protected by original copyright.

Please scroll down to view the document itself.

Please refer to the repository record for this item for information to help you to cite it. Our policy information is available from the repository home page.

Engineering Workers and the Rise of
Labour in Coventry 1914-1939

F. W. CARR

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University
of Warwick September 1978.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with Coventry in the period 1914 to 1939. It is a study of the developments in the city's labour movement in this period. It concentrates on the fortunes of engineering trade unions, the Labour Party, the Co-operative movement, and the Communist Party. The aim of the thesis is to explain the way the labour movement changed in these years, and to draw attention to the shifts in working class consciousness that took place.

Although most of the thesis covers the period 1914 - 1939 there is an introductory survey that covers the development of large scale engineering in Coventry, and the growth of the engineering unions and the Labour Party before the First World War. The thesis then follows the progress of the unions during the war, and explains the effect of the main war-time strikes. The years after the war, upto 1922, are dealt with in detail, as these were years of political and industrial upheaval. The lockout of the engineering unions in 1922 is also dealt with in detail, and the thesis looks at the effect of the lockout on the AEU in particular.

Then the position of the unions in the period of set-backs and defeats after 1922 is covered, as is their eventual recovery in the 1930's. A study is made of the way the recovery took place, and the differences between the resurgent trade unionism and the earlier unionism of the war and the early 1920's are shown. The thesis also looks at the effect of the General Strike on Coventry. Throughout the thesis, an attempt is made to explain the changing relationship between the Labour Party and the trade unions, and account for the gradual emergence of the Labour Party as the majority party in the city. The victory of the Labour Party in the local elections is considered, and an assessment of Labour's period of rule between 1937 and 1939 is given. The role of the Communist Party in organising the unemployed in the post-war

years, and its involvement in the unions, and particularly the recovery of the unions, is studied.

The thesis also covers the political life of Coventry in this period, and therefore deals with the Conservative and Liberal Parties and the coalition they formed against the Labour Party. It attempts to explain the many different ways in which these parties exercised social and political leadership in Coventry. The work of the City Council in the fields of housing and education is studied, and emphasis given to the differences in policy between the Labour Party and the other political parties, and the impact of Council policies on working class people.

The role of the Engineering Employers' Association is studied, and the changes in its relations with the unions throughout this period. Attention is also given to its relations with the local political parties, and its influence on Coventry in general. The internal discussion that took place within the Coventry Co-operative Society in the 1920's is assessed, as is its strengthening links with the Labour Party.

The thesis examines the way the development of mass production in the engineering industry changed jobs and changed the role of the unions in the factories. The response of trade union shop stewards to changing conditions is examined, both in the period of unrest during and after the First World War, and in the second part of the 1930's. Technological change in the period is only dealt with in its effects on employment, though a broad outline of economic change is given.

C O N T E N T S

	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE - Coventry Before the First World War	1
The Arrival of the New Industries ...	1
Population Changes ...	13
Political Parties ...	17
The Co-operative Movement ...	21
The Unions ...	23
The Labour Party ...	44
VII ...	48
CHAPTER TWO - The War ...	56
Industry at War ...	56
The Response to the War ...	58
Housing Problems ...	68
Unions and Shop Stewards ...	75
The Embargo Strike ...	96
The General Election ...	104
VII ...	106
CHAPTER THREE - Post War Political Struggles	115
Unemployed Struggles ...	115
The Communist Party ...	141
The Labour Party ...	153
CHAPTER FOUR - PART I - Post War Industrial Struggles	168
After the War ...	169
Unions Push for Better Conditions ...	171
The Overtime Ban ...	177
The Employers' Attack ...	180
Apprentices and Machines ...	189
Shop Stewards in Decline ...	193
CHAPTER FOUR - PART II - Managerial Functions Dispute	198
CHAPTER FIVE - The Unions in Defeat ...	245
Non-Union Workshops ...	245
The General Strike ...	259
The Unions in Isolation ...	279
The Minority Movement ...	284
CHAPTER SIX - Civic Leaders ...	303
The Coalition ...	303
Education in Coventry ...	324
Social Neglect ...	337
Progressive Party ...	343

		<u>Page</u>
CHAPTER SEVEN - The Labour Challenge	...	354
The Labour Party	...	355
Labour Politics	...	360
The Co-operative Movement	...	367
A Labour Majority	...	377
CHAPTER EIGHT - Housing in Coventry	...	389
Housing Problems	...	390
The Stoke Heath Rent Strike	...	395
Labour's Building Attempts	...	405
Slum Clearance	...	414
The Housing Boom	...	418
CHAPTER NINE - The Unions in Recovery	...	428
The Expansion of Engineering	...	429
Young Workers and Piece-work	...	435
The Union Revival	...	458
CONCLUSION	...	496
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	...	508
BIBLIOGRAPHY	...	510

CHAPTER ONE

Coventry Before the First World War

This chapter covers the engineering industry, the growth of the city, and the growth of the labour movement in the years up to 1914. The two decades before the war saw the rapid expansion of large scale manufacturing, and the expansion of the population through migration. This growth swept away the tradition of hostility to the factory system that had existed, and encouraged the emergence of craft trade unionism. But because of the speed and rapidness of the growth of engineering, the craft tradition did not develop strong roots. Trade unionism grew, not only among skilled engineering workers, but among semi- and unskilled as well. The Trades Council rapidly developed as the major force in the labour movement, while the Labour Party was slower to grow.

I The Arrival of the New Industries

Coventry has experienced various changes of fortune over the centuries. In the middle ages, the city was an important woollen centre, and for a time was the fifth largest city in the country. But by the end of the eighteenth century this trade had gone, and the city had lost any claim to national importance. The silk ribbon trade, however, restored fortunes in the nineteenth century, as did the lesser trades of clock-and watchmaking. Both these trades in turn declined after the 1860s, leaving a residue of cheap labour that proved an attraction first to the bicycle trade, then motors, then a range of engineering trades.

An account of the rise and fall of ribbon weaving in the city may be found elsewhere,⁽¹⁾ but a number of attitudes created by that industry persisted for many years. The trade was characterised by a hostility to

large scale production and the factory system, and the resulting proliferation of small workshops encouraged a spirit of co-operation between master and men and political moderation. As late as 1857, out-work weavers, men who worked at home in their top rooms, many of whom were small masters owning a couple of looms, were able to impose their list of piece prices on the factory owners, who were thus denied the right to pay their workers a weekly wage rather than by the piece. The strike to enforce the list has been described as "without parallel in nineteenth century England."⁽²⁾ Weavers were so hostile to factories that successful attempts were made to create "cottage factories" where a steam engine was used to provide power to a row of cottages, so enabling the weavers to enjoy the independence of cottage production together with the use of power looms.

A lock-out in 1860 coincided with the Cobden treaty reducing import duty on French silk, and the weaving trade in Coventry fell into a permanent decline that forced many outworkers and factory masters out of the trade. There was a partial revival in the 1880s and the trade survived into the twentieth century, mainly on the basis of small workshop production. A few companies still produce silk ribbons in the city, the chief one being Cash's and Grant's.

The trade was concentrated in the northern and eastern parts of the city, principally in Hillfields, Edgwick and Foleshill, and some characteristic weavers' cottages can still be seen in these areas. On the western side of the city, particularly around Chapelfields the watchmaking trade flourished in the nineteenth century with the same mode of production as in ribbon making, namely home work or small workshops next to the home. Surviving buildings show a master watchmaker would own a large house with several cottages for his journeymen built on at the back, with the top floors

given over to workshops. Watchmakers also had no enthusiasm for large-scale production, and this led to a decline in the trade at about the same time as the decline in ribbon weaving. However, by 1935 there were still 53 watchmaking concerns in the city,⁽³⁾ though only two, Rotherham's and Fred Lee and Co. were of any size.

In 1863, the Coventry Sewing Machine Co. was established in the city to utilise the pool of skilled labour that existed. The venture did not prosper, and in 1868 the company turned to bicycle production, turning out copies of French models. One of the people involved in the enterprise was James Starley, head of a family that played an important part in the cycle trade in the city.⁽⁴⁾ Under his guidance, the company changed its name to the Coventry Machinist Co. and concentrated exclusively on cycles. One of the offshoots of the firm was the Rover Co. which produced the first "safety bicycle" in 1885.

For some time the cycle trade was able to exist in harmony with the two other trades: all were on a small scale, undercapitalised and without any clear division between skilled worker and employer. E.W. Cooper, who claimed to be the first cyclist in Coventry, remarked "at one time, when the demand exceeded the supply, the average mechanic with an attic and a length or two of 'gas pipe' soon became a full-blown cycle maker."⁽⁵⁾ There was much overlapping of the trades, with a tendency for small manufacturers to move out of the older trades into cycle making. In some cases, workers who despaired of becoming their own master in their own trade, established themselves in another, while a number of manufacturers tried to combine different trades. At least one man managed to combine all three of Coventry's trades. William Riley inherited his father's weaving business and ran it for twenty

years before purchasing a local cycle company in 1890, running the two side by side, before concentrating exclusively on cycles. One of his inventions brought in the third trade, for he experimented with the fitting of clock springs onto the back wheels of his bicycles to make them easier to cycle uphill. It did not appear to catch on. Like James Starley, he became head of a family that played an important part in the development of vehicles in the city.⁽⁶⁾

Cycle-making together with watches and ribbons provided a social organisation of work that cared for the individual, providing friendship and familiarity on the job. The Coventry Machinist Co. may have signalled a new era in production for the city, but in its early years work was conducted in the traditional way of working in small groups or gangs, often cemented together by a paternalist master. The gang system was by no means peculiar to Coventry, but was particularly strong there, even in very small workshops where the master was also the gang leader. In the bigger workshops, leading skilled men would act as sub-contractors, or "piece gaffers". (This term was common to all trades). They would be given a price for a job and would see that the gang they led shared out the money when the job was done. For a time gang work seemed to go hand in hand with paternalism, and even new industries in the city succumbed to it. In 1896, Thomas Smith moved his forging works to Red Lane in Coventry, to exploit the boom in the cycle trade. An employee at the time recalled,

"On summer evenings, you could see a great number of men and lads from the works strung out along the side of the canal trying to catch fish. It all helped to make our happy family atmosphere. We were like a little village then, all on our own. Mr. Smith was like a father to us... Hard times were in store for us, but we were loyal to the Company because that loyalty had been put into us as lads by Thomas Smith and the way he treated us." ⁽⁷⁾

Obviously, official company histories tend to favour these sort of statements, but the recollections of the workers do not sound false. It is also worth bearing in mind how close the country came to the centre of Coventry, and that much of the new labour drawn into the city in the period before the War came from the rural areas of the Midlands, and brought in rural traditions and ways of behaviour.

Eventually, large-scale production destroyed paternalism, but it did not destroy gang work, which continued to exist in sections of the motor industry well beyond the Second World War.

The situation of the three trades surviving alongside each other in harmony, with similar traditions and attitudes, could not last, and it is a tribute to the independent individualism of the Coventry worker that it lasted so long. Watchmaking and weaving had lost the mass market and been forced to concentrate on expensive high quality goods in small numbers. Cycle making, in contrast, had begun as a trade catering for the luxury end of the market, but was soon found to have mass market potential, providing that the method of production could be changed, and the old attitudes removed. In fact, there existed a number of strong forces that were pushing the trade into expansion.

In the first place, the conditions were good. A strong and growing market existed after the 1870s, while components and accessories were readily and cheaply available from the Birmingham and Black Country area. The prospect of substantial profits was thus very real.

Secondly, the nature of cyclemaking was such that an equilibrium could not easily be achieved; the industry had to expand or risk collapse. Manufacture of cycles stimulated a number of dependent trades, such as

wheelmaking, chainmaking, steel tubes, tyres and machine tools. These trades in turn produced a constant stream of technical improvements that made continuous updating of models necessary, and also opened up the way to motor cycles and vehicles. These developments, taking place against a background of fierce competition, needed financing by increased profits coming from increased production. Moreover, the existence of a large number of suppliers with often unreliable supply records forced manufacturers to seek the specialisation and expansion of production and assembly.

Another factor was the introduction of new machinery which enabled manufacturers to reduce their reliance on skilled labour, and so save on costs. Full benefit from new power presses, drilling machinery, hydraulic stamps and elaborate lathes could only be achieved through more efficient use on longer production runs, and by the establishment of separate machine shops in factories. These new machines had a tremendous effect in an industry used to the traditional methods of craftsmen. Cooper worked for some years with Starley at the Machinists Co., one of the most modern factories in the Midlands, which had imported skilled men from Birmingham and London to boost production. Even here craftsmen scorned simple technical advances. Cooper tried to popularise the use of emery wheels for polishing, and commented:

"It will seem incredible, but all work had previously been filed and polished by hand. Profitting by my experience in Birmingham as a brass worker, I was able to demonstrate the advantages of 'Brumagem bobs' (as they were contemptuously called) when high polish was required. I mention this in no spirit of boasting, but as showing the conservative attitude of even first class workmen at that time." (8)

Clearly a more cosmopolitan outlook on the part of management in the use of new machinery could make substantial savings in costs, provided that the craftsmen could be made to change their ways.

Finally, the most important factor was the availability of capital. There was no shortage of people outside the city with money to invest in promising ventures. Initially, the sums required to start production were very small, but the requirements soon became stiffer. In the early 1880s, men could set up production with a capital of £100 or less, but Alfred Herbert, at the end of that decade needed a cheque for £2,000 from his father together with an equal amount from a partner to buy up a ramshackle engineering firm and begin the production of machine tools and the selling of French steel tubes.⁽⁹⁾ However, this capital was sufficient to allow him to achieve a position of prominence in the industry in a short space of time.

The trade could manage the reinvestment of funds generated by trade, but the rapid influx of capital from outside severely shook the trade and provoked a number of 'bicycle booms' that were inevitably followed by periods of overproduction and slump. These upheavals, destructive in the short term, drove many small producers out of the business, and allowed for rapid rationalisation. However, the existence of outside capital alongside local capital produced a number of potential problems, as the splits on the board of the Coventry Chain Co. between the London group and the local group showed.⁽¹⁰⁾

These pressures for expansion forced the cycle trade finally to break with the pattern of small-scale manufacture established by the traditional trades. Masters and craftsmen who could not or would not accept the necessary changes were rapidly driven out of the trade. Cooper himself left in disgust, in 1889, claiming that the piece gaffer system was being exploited by the employers, who "were now able to play one off against the other, profiting by competition. The trade, ceasing to become a novelty,

was fast becoming a grim and stern business of supply and demand."⁽¹¹⁾

It was not only the employers who were changing: Cooper also noted the rapid demise of the old way of working:

"The pace was becoming too fast. I was but one of the crowd now. The old order of things was no more. The shops mostly filled with strangers, pushing and elbowing each other, very little comradeship or unity: even trade unionists were willing to forget fraternal obligations and join in the scramble for self." (12)

Cooper's 'Brumagem bob' had been the thin end of the wedge which rapidly turned the workshops into the dreaded factories; in fact the trade saw the rapid expansion of an aggressive factory system.

This extension of the factory system should not be over-stressed; many small-scale producers remained in business for many years. However, in the space of a few years, large scale production became a reality, and a small number of firms became leading producers. In 1890 a handful of factories in Coventry were setting the pace. By 1896 the Coventry Machinists Co. was claiming 1,000 employees. However, the larger manufacturers found that it was impossible to reconcile planned production with bouts of boom and over-production. In slump periods attempts were made to diversify, and the natural market to turn to was that for motor cycles and cars. Thus a number of the larger cycle companies became car and motor cycle producers. This change-over, which initially was a temporary one to use up surplus productive capacity, became permanent for a number of large producers after the prolonged slump in the cycle trade in the years before 1898. Although the trade continued to grow in the first decade of the new century, companies that had made the change did not change back. Accordingly, there was a drop in the city's share of the cycle industry from 4⁹ per cent in 1891 to 26 per cent in 1911, as the motor industry took a permanent hold in the city.⁽¹³⁾

The change-over to motor production was facilitated by the fact that cycle production had brought a number of specialist accessory and component firms to the city that could easily be switched to produce for motors. Indeed the early motor cycles were merely push cycles with small motors attached, while the early motor cars had a lot of parts in common with cycles. The change-over allowed a number of specialist producers to make very high profits for a number of years. Alick Hill⁽¹⁴⁾ started the Coventry Chain Co. with a capital of £300 in 1896, but by 1915 it was valued at £250,000. Alfred Herbert Ltd. was the largest machine tool company in Europe by 1914, and was entirely financed by the profits it made. Other companies that came to Coventry primarily to take part in the cycle trade and stayed to prosper in the motor trade were White and Poppe, switching from tools to engine manufacture, Dunlop, and the stamping companies Smith's and Brett's.

Although most of the companies to take up motor production emerged from the local trade in the city, the largest and the first came from outside the area. This was the Daimler Motor Company which moved to the city to take advantage of the production expertise that had been built up in the cycle trade. It produced its first cars from a disused textile factory in 1897, and from the start concentrated on expensive high quality cars. In 1910 the company merged with the Birmingham Small Arms company to provide greater stability. By 1914 it was clearly the largest and most successful factory in the city, employing about 5,000 workers, and producing several thousand cars a year.⁽¹⁵⁾ Other companies that started off in the motor business included Maudsley, Standard, and Deasey, but companies like Swift, Lea Francis, Allard, Singer, Rover, Riley and Humber all successfully made the transition from cycle production.

Manufacturers had turned to the motor market to broaden their productive

base, but in fact this market, like that for bicycles, was given to considerable fluctuations, and manufacturers who made a killing one year could be bankrupt the next. Of the 22 companies that entered the motor vehicle industry in Coventry in the years 1901 to 1905, only 3 were still in existence by the 1930s. (Rover, Standard and Lea and Francis).⁽¹⁶⁾ The companies most likely to survive this period of uncertainty in the trade were the ones that were best able to rationalise production. These companies brought in specialised management, particularly in areas such as costing, marketing and output flow, concepts that were quite unknown to the traditional worker. These changes meant a shift in power away from the chargehand to the foreman and later the manager, and from production engineering to production management. In practice, this tendency developed only slowly over a period of many years. Even after the War, the foreman was a person of considerable authority, while the company controlled by businessmen rather than by engineers ^{was} ~~were~~ the exception. Nevertheless, the tendency was there, and the gradual expansion of management authority and control over production was seen to be a necessity by the larger companies.

In planning production, management could either organise vertically or horizontally; that is, they could either specialise in the production or assembly of certain parts of the vehicle, or they could attempt to expand their ownership of components producers, and try to produce as much of their finished product as possible. Most companies tended to specialise production, and so allowed a member of large component companies to develop, but a few, like Daimler, liked to produce as much of the finished product itself as was possible.

Management decisions would depend on the sort of market they were

aiming at, and even before 1914 it was necessary for companies to specialise their market appeal. Daimler and Siddeley-Deasey specialised in the luxury trade, Hillman in small cars, while Rover, after running into difficulty with the small car market, established itself successfully in the large car market with the Rover 12 after 1911.

However specialised, virtually all of the car manufacturers found themselves dependent on other manufacturers at some point in time, for supplies. Records of the Deasey company show that a high proportion of its early payments went to supplies from other Coventry companies, and included payments to motor producers such as Daimler and Rover as well as local components producers such as Rotax, Dunlop and British Thomson Houston. (17) Demand was so variable that producers could easily over-produce certain items, and then sell off its surplus stocks to a competitor. This evened out market swings, but also produced a crop of broken contracts and dissolved business agreements when demand picked up and supplies were short.

This pushing together of companies, caused by market fluctuations, led quickly to a number of mergers and partnerships developing. As was noted above, in 1910, Daimler merged with the larger B.S.A. company in Birmingham, and shortly after also merged with the London-based Associated Equipment Company. Daimler also had a holding in Coventry Chain, one of its major suppliers, and had two of its managers serve as directors for this company. The Chairman of Coventry Chain was also chairman of Thomas Smiths, another major supplier, the bulk of whose products went to the Associated Equipment Co. Thus a chain of companies could be linked, not only through direct control, but through market ties and individual contacts.

The motor cycle trade served as a transitional stage for many companies moving from cycles to cars, and for a time some companies ran all three

trades side by side. Some companies ended up by specialising in motor cycles, though the only one to achieve any size was the Triumph company situated in Priory Street. Other companies, not immediately connected with the motor trade moved to the city before the War, as Coventry rapidly built up an image of a city of skills and profits. In 1912, the British Thomson Houston Co. arrived, and was the first large electrical engineering concern in the city. It contributed to the motor trade, but most of its output went into new fields such as telephones and film projectors. An even more important acquisition for the city was the establishment of a Courtaulds factory in Foleshill in 1904. This was in a fairly depressed old weaving centre, while to the north there existed a number of coalmines. Courtaulds were hoping for "a supply of suitable and cheap" female labour from these communities, and they were not disappointed.⁽¹⁸⁾ The plant was immensely profitable, with a profit of over £300,000 in 1912, a return on capital of 77%. The company had a virtual monopoly in the production of artificial silks, and the Coventry plant, which produced viscose yarn, employed over 2,500 by 1914.

Another important and large new concern to move to the city was the Coventry Ordnance Works, jointly owned by Cammell Laird and John Brown, and established in the city in 1907 to manufacture guns for warships.

Thus by 1914 the old trades in the city had been dwarfed by new industries. The basic ingredients for the city's later expansion already existed before the War. In the space of less than two decades, the nature of work in the city had been transformed as new industries, and with them new factories had sprung up. There were still many small workshops left, even in the new industries, and it is well to remember that most of the factories were small by later standards. But a decisive event had

occurred - large scale industry had arrived in Coventry, and had grown at an extraordinary rate. This development had profound social and political implications.

II Population Changes

The two sets of census returns in 1901 and 1911 give us a reliable guide to the changing social composition of Coventry.⁽¹⁹⁾ The most remarkable feature they show is the rate of population growth. In 1901 the population of the city was 69,978; in 1911 it was 106,349, a growth of 52.4% - the fastest rate of growth in the history of the city and the fastest growth for any County Borough in the Kingdom. Until the boundary changes of 1928 and 1932, much of what is now Coventry was in the Foleshill Rural District, to the north and east of the city, and the population of the District grew by 35% to 23,000. (This changing of boundaries means that many Coventry statistics have to be handled with care.)

Of the increase of 36,000 in the city, only one-third was accounted for by natural increase; the remainder was through migration. The figures for Foleshill show similar proportions. Until 1911 the city's popularity was still regional, for the largest group of migrants (10,600) came from the rural areas of Warwickshire, while a further 5,600 came from Birmingham. Staffordshire and Worcestershire provided substantial numbers, while in contrast the total population in the city from Wales, Scotland and Ireland was below 2,000. However, there were growing numbers from Lancashire and Cheshire, and London, both areas with long established engineering trades.

The structure of the population is interesting. In the decade covered by the censuses there was an increase in the proportion of young men. By

1911, over 60% of the inhabitants of Coventry were below the age of 30; in 1901, females outnumbered males by 2,230, but by 1911 there was a majority of 2,200 males over females. Sixty percent of the population between the ages of 20 and 40 were male. Although more females than males migrated to the city from Warwickshire, the male predominance stemmed from the migration from further afield, being due to a large number of single men coming in and to family men leaving their dependents behind.

The city grew continually after 1911, and the population was estimated at 119,000 in 1914.⁽²⁰⁾ By this time only about half of the population of the young city were natives, though the majority of the 'outsiders' were native to the Midlands. The influx of workers into the new industries kept up a continual pressure on accommodation, for the supply of new houses did not keep up with the population growth. In many ways, Coventry was well placed to expand, for there was plenty of land for building within reasonable distance of the city centre in every direction. But the City Council was reluctant to embark on the hazards of local authority provision of housing, and private builders could not keep up with demand. By 1911, 5.3% of the population was living more than two to a room, and the density of the population grew from 24.6 per acre in 1910 to 28.7 in 1914.⁽²¹⁾ The result was that many young couples had to find lodgings rather than have new homes, and many others were forced to live outside the city and travel into work every day.

So much available land close to the city centre was a result of the survival through the nineteenth century of the commons that almost ringed the city, and were protected for usage by the freemen of Coventry. This ancient practice in the past prevented the city from spreading outwards, and

encouraged high density living in the city centre. In the nineteenth century, land at the back of large houses was used to create cottages and densely packed alleys and courts. By the twentieth century there was accordingly a problem of overcrowding^{ed}, insanitary slums in the city centre.

In October 1913 the Liberal newspaper, the Coventry Graphic, spoke of "the indecent, inhuman, and horrifying" conditions in many of these courts, adding "only those who have taken a tour of the lower quarters of Coventry can have any idea of the squalor, the hideous congestion, and the repellent abodes than can be found therein."⁽²²⁾ The City Council took no positive action before 1914, and the Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Snell, admitted that the provisions of the 1909 Housing Act on the demolition of unfit buildings were not being operated due to the lack of alternative homes for those who would be made homeless.

As a result of Council inactivity, there was very considerable variation in the health standards of the city. In 1914 the infantile death rate was 84.6 per 1,000. In Stoke and Hearsall, outer wards, the figures were 63 and 64 respectively, but in the inner wards of Greyfriars and All Saints, the figures were 167.8 and 132.9 respectively. The Annual Report of the Health Officer made it clear that the variations were due to housing conditions.⁽²³⁾ In fact, the problem was limited to a fairly small area, and Coventry lacked any large slum legacy of the industrial revolution, for indeed that revolution had worn only a timid aspect in the city. By average standards, Coventry was a healthier and cleaner city than most, though this was no consolation to the inhabitants of the courts which survived virtually untouched until the drive against slums in the 1930s.

Returning to the census figures, we can see the impact of the engineering industries made on employment in the city. Table 1 shows the main male occupations in 1911 and the motor industry can be seen to be already predominant. While silk weaving and watchmaking accounted for an important number of jobs, over half were in the engineering trades. Table 2 shows the main female occupations, and shows the importance of cycle production to female workers. It is interesting to see that domestic indoor service was still the second largest category of employment for women, despite the fact that this employment was much less important in Coventry than in the country as a whole. In Coventry the figure of 74 servants per 1,000 households compared to the figure of 175 for Warwickshire as a whole and 371 for Royal Leamington Spa.

Table 1: Main Occupations for Males 10 years and upwards in Coventry 1911

Numbers engaged in Occupation.....	37,322
Cycle makers, motor car makers and mechanics.....	11,988
General engineering and machine making.....	5,602
Building and construction.....	2,909
Food, Tobacco, Drink and Lodging.....	2,058
Commercial or Business Clerks.....	1,584
Tool makers.....	1,490
Watch makers, clockmakers.....	1,125
Silk manufacture.....	1,032

Source: Census 1911 - County of Warwick.

Table 2: Main Occupation of Females aged 10 and upwards in Coventry 1911

Numbers engaged in Occupation.....	13,060
Textile manufacture.....	2,844
Domestic indoor servants.....	1,741
Cyclmaking.....	1,476
Law, Commercial, Bank, Insurance Clerks.	963
Food, General Shopkeepers and Dealers...	725
Dressmakers.....	612

Source: Census 1911 - County of Warwick.

II Political Parties

While the economic and social life of Coventry was changing rapidly, political development was much slower, and the political outlook, on the surface at least, did not seem very different in 1914 to that in 1900. The weaving trade left a strong mark on the city's political behaviour. The small scale nature of the weaving trade and the lack of a clear division between master and journeyman produced an open community in which everyone who completed their apprenticeship became freemen, eligible to vote in all elections, and to participate in the management of the freemen's funds and the enjoyment of freemen's privileges. In the prosperous periods of the nineteenth century weavers saw themselves as having more in common with small masters than with unskilled working people. Although Coventry had a popular franchise, its voters were content to return middle class radicals rather than working men to Parliament. In 1837 Bell the Chartist stood in the General Election in Coventry but was heavily defeated by a Radical, and left denouncing the freemen franchise as "shopocracy".⁽²⁴⁾ The link between weavers and what became the radical wing of the Liberal Party endured, and even after the Cobden treaty had severely damaged Coventry's trading position and caused great distress in the city, the majority of the weavers stood by the doctrine of free trade, seeking only a specific exemption for themselves rather than a general abolition.⁽²⁵⁾

Yet Bell was right, for Liberal control meant that political power rested exclusively in the hands of the middle classes in Coventry - the tradesmen, businessmen, manufacturers and local professional people. Weavers might have supported the Liberals, but there is no sign that they made any impact on the local party apparatus. The various freemen's institutions and charities were likewise in the hands of the local worthies -

the "shopocracy" leavened with a sprinkling of landed gentry and manufacturers. As an instrument of social control the freemen system lost much impact after the granting of the suffrage, but the political life of the city remained relatively free from working class influence well into the twentieth century. However, when working people did begin to contest elections, they seldom stood under the auspices of the Liberal Party. Having participated in what was a long informal "Lib-Lab" alliance, the labour movement in the city was well aware of the limitations of trying to get working men to represent the Liberal Party, and so was ready for the establishment of an independent party of labour. This contrasts with the situation in Birmingham where a less well-organised and more isolated labour movement felt it necessary to go through a long lasting alliance with the Liberal Party in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. (26)

By the twentieth century in Coventry, the local dominance of the Liberal Party had disappeared, and the Liberals were in a minority on the City Council. However, it would appear that the Liberals could still rely on working people's votes in the general elections, for there was always a Liberal M.P. despite the Conservative majority in the local elections. Workers discriminated in their voting for there appeared to be no distinction between the local Liberal and Conservative parties, either in policy or in social composition. Both parties drew support from and gave places to four groups; small manufacturers, businessmen, professionals and tradesmen. Political controversy thus frequently cut across party lines, and many divisions tended to be between the "economy" factions in both parties, who objected to virtually any form of public expenditure, and the "rest" who objected only to money being spent on most things.

Even those who were not of the "economy" group believed that public

expenditure should be as low as possible, and as a result, civic amenities were often of a poor standard. Indeed, one of the fiercest controversies to rage before the War was whether the city could afford to have a Council House or not. Shortly after 1900, land was bought in Earl Street for such a building, and shops were destroyed. But the retail element opposed the scheme and the land stood empty for ten years until the retailers won a majority of the Council to support a plan for a building with shops on the ground floor, and offices above. Despite local opposition to this, it went to the Local Government Board, where it was turned down; the President of the Board, John Burns stated that the city needed a more worthy Council building. Eventually work went ahead on the original plans in 1913. The issue generated much heat, and was the dominant topic at several elections, though it appeared to cut across party lines. It is a good example of the extreme cost consciousness of both parties, a feature of the city which ~~was~~ survived through the period.

Lack of political differences did not stop the two parties from keenly contesting local elections. Although it would frequently happen that less than half of the wards would be contested, because of agreements between the parties, those contests that took place were fought vigorously. In the last two elections before the War, in 1912 and 1913, the percentage of votes cast in wards where contests took place was 71.9% of the electorate and 64.7% respectively. So fiercely did the two parties engage each other that the elections became something of a scandal, and tales of bribes and free drink and car trips circulated. After the 1912 elections, which appear to have been particularly scandalous, the three parties (for the Labour Party was then contesting seats) agreed that all canvassing would cease on the evening of the election, and that no political activity would take place on the day

itself. This agreement was not revived after the War.

After the 1913 elections, the Conservative Party had 27 seats on the City Council, including aldermen; the Liberals had 16, Labour 2 and there was 1 Independent. (This was the highest number of seats the Labour Party held before the War). This was the last election until those in November 1919. The two major parties had an agreement dividing the aldermanic seats between them according to the number of Councillors they had. Thus a resolution passed by the Municipal Committee of the Liberal Association in 1913 stated:

"That Alderman Drinkwater be deputed to approach the leader of the Conservative Party in the City Council, and press Councillor Snape's claims to the Aldermanic Vacancy, and to give a pledge to support Dr. Soden for the next vacancy if they consent to support Councillor Snape on this occasion." (27)

This was a regular occurrence, but the two parties kept quiet about these fixes, and made sure that the Labour Party was kept off the Aldermanic bench.

In the 1930s, when it was clear that the Labour Party was likely to become the majority party, local newspapers accused it of introducing party politics into the Council Chamber. In fact, even before the War the two other parties were organised inside the Chamber as well as outside. Both parties had their leaders, Municipal Committees, and some form of discipline for councillors. The only difference between the two periods was that in the later one there were serious political differences between the main parties, while this was not the case before the War.

IV The Co-operative Movement

If such a thing as a labour movement can be said to exist, then it can be divided into three constituent groups - the trade unions, the Labour and other political parties, and the co-operative movement. A survey of these groups in the city before the War does suggest that there was a common ideology and an overlap of personnel and purposes that justifies the use of the word movement.

Perhaps the weakest group, in terms of a sense of common purpose, though the strongest economically, was the co-operative movement. Given the co-operative nature of the work in the city's trades, and the sense of independence that was so strong in the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that a strong co-operative tradition existed in Coventry. Co-operation can be traced back at least to 1829, and an Owenite venture ran in the years 1840-43. This was followed by the Labourers and Artisans Co-operative Society, established with help from Charles Bray, intellectual, phrenologist, friend of George Eliot, and co-operator. Not only did it retail goods but it acquired land for use as workmen's allotments. But the slump in the 1860s, combined with bad management, killed it off.

In contrast to the rather grandiose schemes in Coventry, a small group in Foleshill established a more conservative co-operative society, which later claimed to be the oldest surviving in the country - the Lockhurst Lane and Foleshill Industrial Co-operative Society. Up to 1862 it protected itself from the fluctuations of trade by remaining a closed corporation limited to forty members. After 1862 it relaxed its membership restriction.⁽²⁸⁾

In 1867, a group of young men from the West Orchard Congregational Chapel, mainly clerks, weavers and watchmakers, formed the Coventry

Perseverance Co-operative Society, with a membership of 48 and a capital of £64. Many of the founder members, including Joseph Hepworth, the first President, came from the North of England and were consciously trying to import a Rochdale-type society aimed at religious and moderate men. After many early years of hardship, the society began to expand, and steps were taken to provide a respectable image. Thus, in 1877, new headquarters were established in West Orchard, and the opening ceremony presided over by the Mayor, ended with the National Anthem. As late as 1916 the first historian of the society declared "Politics and Religion have never been allowed to vex the Co-operative movement."⁽²⁹⁾

Notwithstanding this emphasis on respectable self-help, the society came under attack from at least a section of the shopocracy. Its report to the Co-operative Congress in 1893 stated that "it had been openly attacked in the public press by several of the leading traders of the city, who have become jealous of the progress made by the society". The President and Secretary of the Society, both employees of the Coventry Gas Company, were forced on pain of dismissal to sever all their connections with the Co-op.⁽³⁰⁾

This persecution did not interfere with the growth of the Society. By 1908 the Co-op. owned large bakeries and dairies, had about 10,000 members, a turnover of £240,000, and a dividend that averaged 2s. 6d. in the £. This increase in size brought it to the attention of the trade union movement, and trade unionists and Labour Party members began to get elected to the Management Board. In 1914 for the first time the Society resolved that all its employees should become members of trade unions.⁽³¹⁾ This decision can be taken as a sign that the Society was prepared to identify

itself with the working class movement, but there is no doubt that it had moved very slowly in this direction, and its commitment was still partial, as the controversies after the War inside the Society showed. The religious inspiration, together with the fact that the Society preceded the growth of trade unions meant that it required an effort to bring it into a position of support for organised labour.

V The Unions

Before examining the growth of modern trade unions in the city, it is well to remember some of the peculiarities of employment in Coventry. The rapid shift from workshop to factory meant that payment systems appropriate to small scale production were carried on by larger factories. In practice this meant an early development of piece-work payment. Before 1914, there was a gradual move to piece-work in engineering and allied trades throughout the country, but the move in Coventry was particularly rapid. Often it was gang piece-work, but as the supervisors and foremen yielded some of their influence to higher management, the bargaining power of the gangs dwindled, and the individual worker had to confront management. G.D.H.Cole wrote:

"The result of the dispute of 1879 was to give an impetus to the movement for the introduction of piece-work and similar systems, and at the same time to give collective sanction to the method of purely individual bargaining on all questions of piece-work prices. Under the curious name of "mutuality", this method became firmly established over a considerable part of the industry." (32)

Thus there were national causes for the decline of the bargaining power of the gang. However, Cole went on to comment that the mutuality clause was gradually subverted as Workshop Committees appeared to regulate prices, and a gang system would probably make it easier for these committees or

for piece-work stewards to appear, though there is not enough available evidence in Coventry to make a firm statement on this point.

Piece-work systems were forced on the trade unions, and caused disputes well after the 1897 lock-out. In 1907, the tinsmiths at Daimler went on strike against a premium bonus system, but although they were out for seven weeks they lost.⁽³³⁾ If these men, some of the most highly organised in the City, could not defeat new payment systems, then it was unlikely that any others would. In fact, for most unskilled and semi-skilled workers, piece-work preceded effective trade union organisation.

Trade union opposition to piece-work was based on the fact that it hindered the acceptance of a flat district rate. It also divided production workers against themselves and against the skilled worker. The skilled worker was confined to producing, setting, modifying and maintaining the production machines, while the semi-skilled worker worked them. The former remained on a flat time rate, the latter went onto piece rates. The groups of workers thus had different objectives, with the unionised skilled workers concerned to preserve their higher earnings differentials, and the machine operators encouraged to act and negotiate individually.

Although it cannot be quantified, it seems that the early and rapid spread of piece-work in the city enabled the employers to develop payments by results schemes that were highly profitable to themselves. An example of this is in the foundry industry. In 1922 the National Union of Foundry Workers agreed with the Engineering Employers' Federation to accept payment by results in foundries. In fact, most Coventry foundries already had payment by results by 1922, and on terms that were more favourable to the employer than those agreed on in 1922. In particular, it was unusual in the Coventry area for any payments to be made for "scrapped castings" -

jobs scrapped due to faulty workmanship, while the 1922 agreement allowed time rates to be paid. Coventry employers found themselves in strong opposition to the EEF, and tried to insist on the continuation of the more favourable practices that they had established.⁽³⁴⁾

Although the census does not help us, it appears that in the years before the War an increasingly large proportion of the workforce in engineering was regarded by employers as unskilled. In fact the term "machine minder" could and did cover a wide range of skills, but both employers and craft unions, for their own reasons, were reluctant to recognise this. The increase of semi- and unskilled workers in engineering was a national pattern, but again the move in Coventry appears to have been particularly strong. This large number of semi- and unskilled workers made unionisation difficult, but it brought the general unions to the city.

Despite severe trade fluctuations, there is no doubt that wages in Coventry were high, and unemployment, for the most part, low. Again, it is not possible to produce details to confirm this statement, and the seasonal nature of the motor trade meant that conditions of employment could vary from month to month. Nevertheless, high earnings contributed to the migration to the city. But a major contributor to high earnings was excessively long hours; in spring and autumn, peak production times in the vehicle industry, great pressure was put on workers to regard overtime as compulsory. The national agreement between the engineering unions and the EEF was supposed to limit the hours of overtime to the generous figure of 32 hours a month, but allowed work to fixed delivery dates or emergency work to carry unlimited overtime. The minute books of the District Committee of the ASE in Coventry record the difficulties in trying to limit

overtime to the national agreement, and the many occasions when overtime working became excessive. Finally, in August 1910, an agreement between the CDEEA and the five principal engineering unions in the city stated:

"In view of the special conditions of trade in Coventry, the Employers' Association are unable to agree to a limitation of overtime in all cases to 32 hours per month, but are prepared to agree to a maximum of 15 hours in any one week, and that systematic overtime is to be deprecated as a method of production, and that an effort shall be made to observe as far as possible a limit of 32 hours per month." (35)

The agreement also stated that the basic week for day workers was one of 54 hours, with work ending at noon on Saturday, and 45 hours for night workers. Thus the maximum hours permitted by the agreement were 69 a week. This excessive overtime has to be seen in the context of systematic short-time working and layoffs in times of low demand.

In the skilled engineering trades in the city, the two dominant unions were the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, and the Amalgamated Society of Toolmakers. Nationally, the ASE was much bigger than the Toolmakers, but in Coventry there was little difference in size between the two. Both unions organised fitters and turners, though the ASE organised other groups as well. There was no clear division between the groups that the two unions negotiated for, and there were some ASE members who worked in toolrooms. Both unions were organised in a similar way, with power lying with the lay officials on the District Committees. Both were very conscious of their craft status, and their officials tended to be conservative in outlook.

Conservatism was particularly strong in the Toolmakers. Several branches of the union, as late as 1914, refused to join the Trades Council because of its policy of political representation for workers that was

independent of the Liberal and Conservative parties. Those who remained to play a part in the Trades Council were men like John Chater,⁽³⁶⁾ a man known for his moderate views. The only detailed figures of trade union membership in the city before the War date from the Annual Report of the Trades and Labour Council of 1913, which shows the Toolmakers as having 2,634 members (of whom 1,366 were affiliated to the Trades Council) compared with the ASE's membership, recorded as 2,670, all affiliated to the Trades Council.

The ASE also tended to support craft-conscious conservative policies. Its Organising District Delegate for the Midlands before the War was George Ryder, a man who appears to have been particularly severe in his attitude to general unions. However, members of the ASE were sometimes outside toolmaking and toolroom shops and nearer to the problems of production than were members of the Toolmakers' Society. Consequently the union had to push for better organisation to overcome management use of piece-work and overtime.

Conservatism in the craft unions meant first of all an acceptance of the existing trade union structure with its dozens of craft bodies, many of them very small, in engineering alone. It meant a refusal to see a common identity with unskilled or unorganised workers or with women workers. It meant a reluctance to see trade unions involved with politics, and a desire to protect the trade through restrictions. The moderate conservative approach was opposed by supporters of union amalgamation, supporters of general unions and by members of the political organisations such as the ILP or the BSP. The changing nature of industry meant that the conservatism of the craft unions had the potential for acquiring a radical edge, and during the War the craft workers were in the vanguard of the struggle

in the factories.

Well before the War, the ASE had tried to develop a shop steward system. Initially the stewards in the city were little more than collectors of union dues, but they gradually extended their activities to holding a watching brief for the union on working conditions in the factories, and reporting to the branch or district committee. In some areas, especially where piece-work was common, stewards began to break down the principle of mutuality and take on and argue cases affecting their members. Advanced factories had set up stewards' or works' committees before the War, though these were rare.⁽³⁷⁾

In 1907 the District Committee of the ASE made a survey of the union's stewards, and it was reported that there were 21 in the district, though only 14 of these were still operating. The stewards were spread over a number of different factories, with the only concentration being at the Coventry Ordnance Works, where there were four active stewards. (As a relative newcomer to the city, the Ordnance had to offer higher wages initially than other firms, and accept a stronger trade union organisation).

In July 1907, the District Committee took the novel step of trying to establish a new type of stewards' system, on the basis of representation of all the members; there would be either one steward for each department or one for about 50 members. The idea came from reports of a similar experiment carried out by the Glasgow District Committee, and it was decided to concentrate on the Humber New Works and the Ordnance. Although a shop meeting of Ordnance members was poorly attended, 8 new stewards were elected, but the movement did not prosper, possibly because a long-drawn-out dispute over pay at the Ordnance distracted the attention of the District Committee. At any rate, the system did not spread out from the Ordnance to

the other factories as was hoped.⁽³⁸⁾ Still, it shows that the Coventry committee was in touch with other areas, and ~~were~~^{was} keen to make changes if ~~it~~^{they} could.

The dispute that occurred at the Ordnance in 1907 was not particularly significant, but gives an interesting picture of the problems facing craft organisation in the city. The district rate for skilled workers at that time was 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ d an hour, but men in the gun bays at the Ordnance were only getting 8d. Moreover, the manager, Bullock,⁽³⁹⁾ was making life difficult for union members, and men asking for the district rate were being sacked. One report to the District Committee states:

"Things were unbearable, they were being sweated and bullied and as soon as their jobs were finished out they had to go till fresh jobs were ready." (40)

In August the Toolmakers and ASE imposed a ban on overtime, and got the local Federation of Engineering Unions, which had the ten main engineering unions in the area in it, to impose its ban. By October it was clear that the firm was getting round the overtime ban by using boys and unskilled workers, and the Workers' Union, which belonged to the Federation, was allowing its members to work overtime. The ASE resolved that none of its members were to start work in the gun shops for less than the full rate, and those working there at 8d an hour were eventually to be withdrawn. The Federation also took up this position. By December it was clear that this action was not working and that members of some unions were in no mood for a dispute. A tense meeting of the Federation decided by the Chairman's casting vote to call off the dispute, hiding the defeat by calling it a postponement until a move for a general wage advance was to be made in the city. The ASE objected to this decision, and criticised the Federation for inconsistency, and also claimed that the "sectionals" -

its word for the other craft unions - had allowed their members to start work for 8d an hour during the dispute. Nevertheless, they reluctantly agreed to call the dispute off.⁽⁴¹⁾

So despite the existence of the Federation, the different craft unions could still fall out, and indeed the minute book of the ASE District Committee recorded a number of complaints at about this time of the action of other unions' members, while no doubt these unions would criticise the ASE.

The dispute also showed how the old forms of struggle survived in the craft unions. The District Committee did not see its duty as being to call a strike, but to impose a rate for the job, and force its members to achieve that rate. Indeed, an engineer not getting the district rate could be refused admittance to the union. Much, then, still rested with the individual member, who had the obligation to fight for his rights. This image, of the independent craftsman standing up for his rights was rapidly becoming a fiction, but in the period before the War, blacking of goods and boycotts were more important to the craft unions as sanctions than were strikes.

In the context of large and expanding factories, with a group of skilled unions competing against each other and being threatened by the unskilled, the craft myth of the independent artisan faded away. The idea of respectability, which had played an important part in the opposition to the factory in the nineteenth century, took a few knocks as well, and no doubt die-hard opponents told themselves they were right, as they read in the Coventry Sentinel⁽⁴²⁾ of the celebration party given by the Daimler Company (the most respectable in the city) in honour of its newly-patented engine, the "Silent Knight". The party turned out to be less than silent:

The Daimler gave a party;
 They had piano playing,
 And speakers too, but very few
 Could hear what they were saying.
 On Friday in the Drill Hall met
 Two thousand hands or more,
 And most of them got very wet
 As down the drink did pour.

The Singers tried their hardest
 To get a decent show;
 The audience howled louder:
 "Oh, oh, Antonio,"
 And all of them grew the merrier
 The more drink did they mop,
 And some fought with empty bottles
 Till the constables made them stop.

The Daimler gave a party -
 Where is that party now?
 Where is the flowing whisky,
 And the once infernal row?
 Gone when the dawn of morning
 Breaks on the scene of the fight -
 Smashed chairs and empties witness
 The joys of the "Silent night!"

No doubt the skilled workers at the Daimler, after they had sobered up, would have put the blame on the shiftless members of the Workers' Union, for one of the most important features of the Coventry trade union world was the establishment of a strong Workers' Union in the city in the years before the War.

This establishment was not easy. The Workers' Union was founded in 1898, and a branch was started in Coventry in October 1899, aiming at the organisation of all grades of labour in all industries, but particularly the unskilled worker. There are no surviving records of the early days of the Coventry branch, but it is known that it struggled for survival for several years. The Annual Report of the Union in 1907 shows that the Coventry branch had an income of £90, which suggests only a couple of hundred paid up members. W.H.Lissaman, a prominent local socialist, was

the branch secretary.⁽⁴³⁾ The dispute at the Ordnance in that year, already referred to, shows the weakness of the Union. It refused to obey the Federation's instructions to ban overtime, and when the craft unions remonstrated, the Union replied that its members wished to co-operate,

"But pleaded that they were open to the danger of all being cleared out en bloc as men of their class were easy to obtain. The Union felt too insecure to take drastic action as scarcely 10% of their members were in benefit. They felt that the Federation had scarcely given them the help they had a right to expect in organising the unskilled men in Coventry." (44)

It offered to ban overtime only if the Federation would agree to a sympathy strike if Workers' Union members were victimised. This the Federation was not prepared to do, and it was eventually agreed that Workers' Union members would be allowed to work up to 15 hours a week overtime until it became financially strong enough to enforce Federation decisions.

By 1912, the Union could be said to have reached this position of strength and to have made a strong impact on wages and conditions in the city. Between 1907 and 1910 it more than doubled in size, and after 1910 the rate of increase accelerated. In 1911 a second branch was formed, and by the end of 1912 there were 4 branches, one of them exclusively for women; in the same year the Union at last achieved recognition from the CDEEA. Increased employment in the city allowed the Union to recruit successfully, and campaign for a minimum wage of 6d an hour for unskilled engineering workers. (This was about 70% of the skilled rate). John Beard, Midlands Organiser and General Secretary of the Union pointed to the need for high basic wages, saying "Conditions here are abnormal, men have to travel many miles to work, owing to a shortage of houses, and the

cost of living is apart from house rents, very high."⁽⁴⁵⁾ A well organised campaign culminated in a short strike at three of the largest factories in the Employers' Association in May 1912, just at the height of the spring production of motor vehicles. After a few days, the employers gave way and not only conceded the demand for 27/- for a 54 hour week, but also agreed to recognise locally the Union as possessing negotiating rights on behalf of unskilled workers. The Union had thus established itself as a force to be reckoned with.

Beard commented that it was a "short, sharp, well-organised conflict," which, he claimed,

"Despite many obstacles, not the least of them that the skilled workers refused to associate with us, achieved 6d per hour minimum in the cycle, motor and engineering trades. And again, in spite of the prophecies of the higher paid, we are a recognised Union by the Employers' Association." (46)

Clearly relations with the craft unions were still poor, although the support received by the Union included support from the craft-dominated Trades Council.

As a result of the success, Beard was able to say that "Coventry men may be taken as the leaders of this or any other Union, so far as wages are concerned, though we have always to recognise that Coventry is an expensive city for workmen to live in."⁽⁴⁷⁾ In fact the new rate of 27/- for 54 hours for unskilled men, although still well below the fitters' and turners' rate of 38/- for 53 hours, involved a sizeable increase for many workers, with some men getting an increase of up to 6/9d a week. Of equal importance was the establishment for the first time of a single district rate for labourers. Before the strike some of the labourers were already getting 6d an hour, although this was not general, and according to the Trades Council the men already on the rate played an

important part in the struggle, for it stated that "All grades of members nobly responded to the demand, the highest paid members came out in support of the lowest paid."⁽⁴⁸⁾ It should be remembered that a year later, in 1913, the Workers' Union was in the forefront of the Black Country strikes, where the demand was for a weekly rate of 23/- for unskilled workers, so clearly even before the war relatively high wages had been established.

It is likely that the Coventry success was an important encouragement to union organisers and strikers in the Black Country, and it appears that at the time Coventry was one of the strongholds of the Union, which was mainly organised outside engineering, and Coventry activists were able to help in a number of disputes. This help was always needed, for while the unskilled could rely on help from socialists and a number of middle-class sympathisers, (many vicars showed sympathy with the Black Country strikers), little help was forthcoming from the established trade union leadership. The typical attitude was expressed by George Ryder, Organising District Delegate for the ASE, covering an area that included Coventry, Birmingham and the Black Country. In the ASE Monthly Journal, writing under the headline "Engineering and the Strike, Plain Words to the Workers' Union. A shilling and a Button do not Make a Trade Unionist," he complained that the strike was being spread needlessly, and hinted at intimidation. Men were striking without stopping to think where the dispute pay was coming from, and were causing skilled men to get laid off. Even worse, he claimed

"The Workers' Union is not so much directing the strikes as following them, and is making members by the thousand. Men who have resisted all inducements to join the skilled unions for which they are eligible are paying their shilling entrance fee and consider themselves trade unionists as soon as they can get a button in their coats."

This is a back-handed compliment, for it is admitting that the Workers' Union had succeeded where other unions had failed, though there is no evidence to suggest that the other unions tried all that hard to recruit.

Ryder went on to say

"While the fight for the improvement of the conditions of what is called 'The Bottom Dog' claims the sympathy and support of every trade unionist, we cannot be expected to go into raptures of applause concerning fitters, turners, smiths, etc., who have been content to work for from two to five shillings under rate alongside our members, and having been thrown into a struggle they did not seek expect to be hailed as valiant warriors and to purchase their place among the elect for a shilling entrance fee and threepence a week contribution." (49)

Written at the height of the Black Country struggle, this is a classic piece of craft union vindictiveness, and contains most of the criticisms that were levelled at general unions for several decades to come. The concept of spontaneous unorganised action was one that Ryder found difficult to grasp, just as he was unable to understand the position of the skilled worker who was too weak to use individual action to get his proper rate of pay but had to rely on mass action. All Ryder could see was irresponsible strikes that were likely to run down union funds, and demands from unskilled men to try to achieve overnight what had taken the craft unions decades to get. Anyone can put a button on their coat but only a member of the elect could be a consistent and responsible unionist for life. Trade unionism, like salvation, was a matter of hard work and application. If a man was not a good unionist getting his proper rate, he had only himself to blame. Ryder was a Councillor in Smethwick, and a leading representative of the self-help wing of trade unionism as opposed to the more activist wing represented by the socialistic leadership of the Workers' Union.

The Workers' Union in Coventry continued to grow right up to 1914.

However it suffered from the problem of a rapid turnover in membership. The financial position of the Union in Coventry in 1913 suggests that over 2,000 new members joined in that year, yet its total affiliated membership in six branches according to the Trades Council in 1913, was only 2,166. It could be that these figures were out of date, or that the branches had not affiliated their full membership, but the high level of union entrance fees strongly suggests that there was a rapid turnover of membership.⁽⁵⁰⁾ By the outbreak of War, the Union had over 3,000 paid up members, and was the largest union in the city.

Politically, the growth of the Workers' Union was closely linked to the growth of the Labour Party and socialist movements. Lissaman, Poole, Morris, Mabbs, Alice Arnold, and many others of the early champions of the Union were active in either the ILP, SDF, or the Labour Representation Committee. After 1913, the Workers' Union was given its first substantial vote on the Trades Council, though it still appears to have been under-represented, but it was able to increase socialist influence on that body, and in 1919, the rather erratic socialist, A.E. Mabbs, a Workers' Union member, was elected President.⁽⁵¹⁾

The Union was mainly organised in the engineering industry, but did try to organise outside it. It organised the bus and tram drivers, and tried to organise the workers at the Foleshill factory of Courtaulds. The company had a rigidly anti-union policy, wages were low, and conditions poor. Nearly all of the unskilled workers were women, but even the male engineers there were poorly organised. Workers at the plant had to suffer strong smells, high temperatures, and an atmosphere that caused temporary blindness to some of them. Local residents complained of the smells, and the conditions there provoked Arthur Henderson to speak of

them in the House of Commons. The Sentinel ran a campaign against local conditions, describing them as "loathsome, injurious and degrading."⁽⁵²⁾

The Workers' Union made a number of attempts to organise the plant, the most successful being in December 1913, when a strike occurred over the behaviour of a supervisor, but quickly turned into one of union recognition. After a few days out, the majority of the 2,500 workers went back, but over 600 remained on strike for over a month. Vigorous picketing produced a number of incidents, but the strikers eventually gave up without winning recognition. It appears that the hard core of the strikers were men and that the women were slow to respond, especially in view of the company's tactics which were to buy off key groups with higher wages, and give bonuses at times of union pressure.⁽⁵³⁾

Lack of success in unionisation may have been due to lack of coordination between the Workers' Union and the National Federation of Women Workers. Both organisations were trying to recruit women, and appear to have regarded each other as rivals. Their attempts to recruit at Courtaulds seem to have been carried on in isolation of each other. An undated newspaper report, (but probably from the Sentinel in 1912) give an account of a recruitment speech by Mrs. Young, a national officer of the NFWW, during a visit to Coventry. She addressed a mass meeting of girls, mainly from Courtaulds and the Ordnance, and was supported on the platform by several prominent members of the local labour movement, though no one from the Workers' Union was present. There also seemed to be an important difference in tactics between the two unions, for Mrs. Young favoured recognition talks with the Courtaulds management without any threat of union sanction. She claimed the manager of Courtaulds was sympathetic "and he had expressed his willingness to meet the trade union

representatives at any time respecting working conditions." To loud applause, she went on to denounce "the tyrannies of some of the foremen and foremistresses," but said "If they found either foremen or forewomen taking undue advantage of their positions they could appeal with confidence to their manager, who had assured her that his interest was entirely in his workpeople."⁽⁵⁴⁾ In view of the fact that the strike in 1913 was caused by management's refusal to act against unpopular supervision or to recognise the right of unions to represent the workforce, these assurances did not amount to much. The episode suggests that many of the established unions in the city were prepared to back the actions of a respectable campaign for recognition rather than support the Workers' Union attempt to stage a strike. In the event, both methods failed, and the plant remained unorganised for many years, though organisation at Courtaulds Engineering was better.

In fact, despite the variety of jobs for women, the two unions made little headway in organising them. The Federation was able to call meetings and organise branches in some of the textile concerns, but found it difficult to keep them going. It had occasional successes, as at J. Cramp and Son in 1913, but in that year its affiliated membership of the Trades Council was only 450, while the Women's Branch of the Workers' Union had only 110 affiliated members.⁽⁵⁵⁾ The Federation had had a women's organisation in the city from 1906, while the Women's branch of the Workers' Union only dated from 1912. In the same year, the national membership of the Federation was less than 15,000 so the Coventry branch was one of the largest in the country. Nevertheless, the majority of women workers in the city, as elsewhere, remained untouched by trade unionism before 1914.

Among the other unions of importance in the city, the largest was the

United Kingdom Society of Coachmakers (later the National Union of Vehicle Builders). In 1913 it claimed 800 members in Coventry, and its full time organiser throughout the period was Edward Buckle. The union had made a successful transition from coach to car building, and its members included some of the most highly paid workers in the city. The Coventry branch was the largest branch in the union. Other craft unions, with their 1913 membership, were the Steam Engine Makers (400 members) the National Society of Brassworkers and Metal Mechanics (590 members) the United Machine Workers Association (400 members) and the Birmingham Operative Society of Tinplate and Sheet Metal Workers (also 400 members).⁽⁵⁶⁾ This last body was the most aggressive craft union, and had been the only one to fight the premium bonus system at the Daimler in a long and ultimately unsuccessful strike in 1907. In 1909 it had seceded from the National Amalgamated Tin Plate Workers, as it wanted local autonomy of funds, and the union was restricted to Birmingham, Coventry, and the South Midlands. Soon after 1909 the National Amalgamated established its own branch in Coventry, and although it did not affiliate to the Trades Council till after 1914, it appears to have had several hundred members in that year. There does not appear to have been very intense rivalry between the two unions, nor does it seem to have weakened organisation.

Before the War, there were no large unions in the city outside the engineering industry. In 1913, the National Union of Railwaymen had 370 members, the Co-op Employees had 370, the National Union of Clerks 300, the Typographical Association 269, the Carpenters and Joiners 266 and the Gas Workers and General Labourers 206. The various construction unions probably had a fair number of members, but several were not affiliated to

the Trades Council. Of the 12,800 affiliated Trades Council members, some 8,500 came from the vehicle engineering, and metal industries. (57)

The Annual Report of the Trades Council for 1913 also carried a trade directory, which showed that the highest paid group of workers in the city were patternmakers, getting $10\frac{1}{4}$ d an hour. They were closely followed by Coachmakers and Panelbeaters on 9d to 10d an hour, Coppersmiths ($9\frac{1}{2}$ d), Woodcutting Machinists (9d to 10d), Toolroom workers (9d), skilled production workers (8d), Brassworkers ($8-8\frac{1}{2}$ d) machine hands approximately 7d, and labourers 6d. In fact many production workers would get higher pay, through payment by results schemes. Electricians got the same rates as skilled production workers, while skilled building workers got $9\frac{3}{4}$ an hour. Corporation employees got up to $6\frac{1}{2}$ d an hour, but adult shop assistants got between $4\frac{1}{2}$ d and 7d. They also worked up to 62 hours a week (exclusive of meal breaks) while engineering workers had a 53 hour basic week. (58)

The fulness of the reports of the Trades Council shows the importance of this body in the years before the War. Its size and influence increased more rapidly than that of the Labour Party, and it could claim to be the authentic voice of organised labour in the city. Its membership figures show the rapid progress trade unions made as industry expanded in the years before the War. In 1907 22 union branches with less than 3,000 members were affiliated, but affiliated membership grew to 7,491 in 1911 and 12,847 by 1913, in 64 branches. (59) This explosion of union membership was partly due to an increasing number of trade union branches deciding to join the Trades Council, but mainly due to a rapid extension of trade unionism itself in the engineering trades. Even after accounting for the rise of the Workers' Union, it is clear that there was still a very

rapid advance in all sections. There isⁱⁿ/sufficient evidence to say whether this advance was characterised by industrial militancy and strike action, and there does not seem to have been any great wave of unrest; nevertheless, a growth of this size suggests very strongly indeed that significant changes were occurring in the consciousness of working people. Nationally, trade union membership in the same period grew substantially, though not at the same rate, and it seems safe to conclude that Coventry moved from being a city where trade unions had little power to being one of the better organised cities (bearing in mind all the limitations this implies) in the few years before the War.

The Trades Council combined its rapid growth as the organ of organised labour in the city with a vigorous and wide ranging intervention in the political life of Coventry. This also reflected the very great change that occurred in the two decades before the War. The Trades and Labour Council, to give it its full name, was not established until 1890, which is remarkably late for a city the size of Coventry, and in its early years seemed to apologise for its existence by ensuring that it made no dramatic political or industrial moves. There was no continuity with the weaving trade unions, which were not affiliated to the Council, and the impetus came from the cycle workers. Its first secretary, J. Crompton, was a prominent Liberal, and the Council's main aim, as described in its first Annual Report was the modest one of "Bringing to the notice of public men subjects which individual societies could not have taken up with so much advantage;"⁽⁶⁰⁾ in other words it was to act as a lobby rather than unite a working class movement.

In contrast, its objects as set down in 1913 were more detailed and more self-confident. Its constitution stated

By forming a permanent local centre for Trades and Labour Societies:

1. To give increasing efficiency to the operation of such societies.
2. To afford assistance in defence of trade union principles.
3. To discuss and promote all questions benefitting the members of such Societies, and the workers generally.
4. To give needed help to local Branches or Societies affiliated.
5. To watch over the local interests of Labour and to take part in national efforts to promote the welfare of Trade Unionists and workers generally.
6. To use its influence towards amicable settlement of local disputes. (61)

This gave the Council considerable scope, and the right to intervene in all local affairs. A few years earlier, it had defined its scope even wider and run into a confrontation with the local Labour Party. In 1909, four trade union branches disaffiliated from the Council complaining that it was too involved in politics. In 1910, the issue was settled, and the Council "thought it wise to confine the operations of the Council to industrial matters only, and leave political action to that other body of Trade Unionists formed for the purpose."⁽⁶²⁾ This shows that the Trades Council was making the running even in political affairs at this time, and the resolution was defined in the narrow sense, to exclude party politics, and not to exclude all political affairs.

Even the ban on party politics could, and had to be, got round. In the general election of 1912, the Council took the somewhat convoluted position outlined below:

"That this Council, whilst unable to officially support a Labour Candidate, yet is of the opinion that an industrial constituency like Coventry ought to be represented in the House of Commons by a direct representative of the workers, and therefore recommends all organisations to give their best support to the present effort now being made to secure this object." (63)

The no party politics restriction was dropped shortly afterwards.

Although knowledge of the Council's activity is restricted by the shortage of documentary evidence, it is clear that the two issues that received most attention, other than industrial matters, were housing and education. On housing, the Council expressed concern over the shortage of houses for working people, and in particular landlords' attempts to eject working class tenants from cheap property in order to renovate them and let them at a higher rate. The City Council for many years refused to have any housing policy at all, and refused to make any provision for evicted families except to offer the Workhouse. The Trades Council also called for a municipal housing programme, and in 1910 formed a Housing Joint Committee with the Co-operative Society, the ILP and the Labour Party. A programme was agreed covering the following points:- 1. To insist on local landlords maintaining their properties in good repair. 2. To educate public opinion to the need for garden suburbs for the workers. 3. To press the City Council for proper Town planning schemes for the future, and 4. To advocate the completion of the Narrow Lane Housing Scheme, and provision for further artisans dwellings with larger bedrooms and gardens. A campaign around these points was mounted, and may have helped in the completion of the Narrow Lane Scheme, the City's first housing venture.⁽⁶⁴⁾

The Council ran a number of campaigns on education in the years before the War, concentrating on secondary education, which it felt should be "full, secular, and free."⁽⁶⁵⁾ In 1907, it claimed that its pressure had won a large number of free places at Barrs Hill Secondary School for girls. It ran a campaign to preserve free places at the other municipal school, Bablake School, and to ensure that working class children enjoyed

the benefits of the old charitable foundations. In 1910 the Council protested against making Empire Day a holiday, though without success, though next year it claimed that together with the Labour Party it prevented a doubling of the fees at Bablake College.

Thus well before the War, the Trades Council was playing an important part in developing and articulating the policies of municipalisation and intervention that were to underly the growing popularity of the Labour Party for several decades.

The Council also contributed to more immediate working class causes, through supporting strikes and individual trade union campaigns, by holding meetings and organising collections. In 1912, during the general strike in Dublin, it held a large protest meeting, and collected a very creditable £336. for the strikers. (This was more than three times the annual income of the Council). It accepted the job of finding homes for 32 children for the duration of the strike, but the scheme fell through, as "religious interference took place."⁽⁶⁶⁾ Like many other Councils, it set up an Amalgamation Committee in 1911 to propagate the idea of fewer and larger unions. It is difficult to say how much influence this body had, as little is known of its activities.

The Labour Party

In contrast, the development of the Labour Party was slow and cautious. The Coventry Labour Representation Committee was formed in 1900 on the initiative of the ILP and local trade unionists, and in the period before the War its function was mainly electoral - it tried to secure the return of Labour candidates on School Boards, Boards of Guardians,

the Magistrates Bench, civic charities and the City Council.

Before 1900 there were active branches of the Social Democratic Federation and the Independent Labour Party in the city and considerable rivalry existed between the two. The SDF and later the British Socialist Party, had its headquarters at Justice Hall, but the ILP had its own meeting room together with billiard room and (tea) bar in Broadgate, and was probably the larger of the two, although estimates suggest that both parties had a couple of hundred members before 1914.⁽⁶⁷⁾ There also existed small branches of the Socialist Party of Great Britain and the Socialist Labour Party in the city.

Most ILP activity was centred round municipal politics, and they were denounced by the BSP/SDF as reformists. Members of the Federation were "active in the unions but never allied themselves with organised labour politically."⁽⁶⁸⁾ The Federation refused to help found the Representation Committee, and stood under their own banner in local elections, though not normally against the Labour Representation Committee. Because one of the first Labour Councillors in Coventry was an SDF member (A.C.Bannington, the local leader of the Federation), the SDF claimed that his ward, All Saints, should always be an SDF ward. When Bannington came up for re-election in 1909, the LRC responded by refusing to sponsor him, and he was defeated.⁽⁶⁹⁾ It was typical of the opportunist and sectarian attitude of the BSP before the War to denounce other groups for reformism, and then demand support from these groups in municipal elections. SDF members achieved some prominence in some unions, and had influence in the Trades Council. This influence was generally used to project the Trades Council as a political as well as industrial body, in order to try to undermine the ILP. which was influential in the LRC.

Electoral progress was slow in the early days of the Labour Party. Their first representative on the City Council came in 1904, but only in 1913 were they able to elect more than one Labour Councillor per year. In that year they achieved their best results ever, and at the start of the War they had four Councillors out of a body of 30 Councillors and 10 Aldermen. Of the four, one, Bannington, represented the BSP, having won back his seat, one, S.G. Poole, represented the ILP., and the other two Harry Wale and Arthur Hook, represented the trade union voice. Wale was a Co-op. employee, Hook was a coachmaker, and both of them could be described as being to the right of the Labour Party, representing the pre-socialist element that could have found a home in the Liberal Party. This meant that the socialist element on the City Council relied heavily on Poole, who was the outstanding leader of Labour in these years. (71)

Poole was particularly concerned with the situation created by the housing shortage, and while the Corporation's housing policy was very inadequate, without Poole it probably wouldn't have existed. The first Housing Committee was not established until 1908, with Poole the Chairman. By 1914 the Committee had established a small estate in Narrow Lane, and owned a number of individual houses, mainly in the Stoke area, totalling about 200. When in January 1914 the Council decided to build another 198 homes, the Trades Council was moved to complain:

"We assert that there are at the present moment in Coventry some 1,200 persons employed who are either compelled to live out of town or to return home to their wives at week-ends, and in addition that some 400 to 500 families are lodging in other people's houses, waiting for the chance of getting a house.

What after all, is 198 houses amongst so many?" (72)

Labour's achievements outside housing were even smaller, but they forced the City Council to consider for the first time the question of

extending public services. The Party campaigned for the municipalisation of the debt-ridden tramway service, the need for a new abbatoir, and a new town hall. One practical achievement was to insert into Corporation contracts a new fair wage clause which the Party claimed was one of the best in the country.⁽⁷³⁾ Thus the small Labour group quickly settled into the pattern of pushing for gradual municipalisation, and an extension of the Council's services, of all kinds. The Annual Report of the Labour Party in 1913 shows that it considered a wide range of municipal affairs, including the disgraceful state of the public lavatories, and the need for urgent movement to improve them. There is little indication that the Party was much involved in other than municipal affairs, and it seemed to have accepted a de facto split between the industrial side of the movement and the political side. This division tended to increase the pressure on the Labour Party to remain purely as an electoral body.

In fact, by 1913, although it contested only a few wards in the elections, Party organisation was fairly solid, with Ward Committees in every one of the 10 Wards, a Women's Labour League, and an Executive Committee of 11. The Executive was composed of 3 delegates from the ILP, 1 ward representative, and 7 trade union representatives. The organisation ensured that the trade unions could control the party if they so choose, but it understated the influence of the ILP, and it also ensured a strong right-wing leadership. All the trade union representatives were from the skilled unions, and four of them were from the skilled Toolmakers' Society. The President of the Party was Harry Wale, the Vice-President T.J.Harris, the secretary Robert Barton, and the Treasurer John Chater. All four men were on the right of the Party.⁽⁷⁴⁾ The Annual Report for 1913 claimed that affiliations to the Party was on the increase, and that the ILP, which

served as the individual membership section of the Party, had about 250 members. With the ILP carrying out its own agitation, and trade union affairs left to the Trades Council the Labour Party had no other field than municipal affairs, and had no impact outside of elections. Many years after its founding, it was still referred to as the Labour Representation Committee.

VII By 1914, Coventry had a rapidly expanding trade union movement, a growing Labour Party, flourishing socialist groups and a strong co-operative movement. Yet it is well to remember that the labour movement was still in its infancy. In 1914, the majority of working people, and 80% of the total engaged in occupation in the city, were outside trade unions, and the majority of working people, if they voted at all, voted Liberal or Conservative. Although the institutions of a modern labour movement - labour and socialist parties, a Trades Council, trade unions and co-ops. - had appeared, only a small number of people were active in them, and only a minority of working people were encompassed by them. In 1914 most working people were not involved in any labour organisation.

However there is more to concepts of labour movement and class consciousness than the counting of heads. The growth of the organisations of labour was directly due to the sweeping changes that were occurring in the economic and social life of the city. The forces that were transforming Coventry were creating a vigorous capitalism based on the technically advanced industries, and at the same time were pushing workers together and widening the gap between worker and management. The results of these changes were, in the space of a few decades, to greatly stimulate the separate organisation of classes in the city and break down the tradition

of master and man working and living alongside each other. New social relations were emerging that were affecting everyone; the development of the organisations of the labour movement showed that for many people this was a conscious change, but the changes were affecting all workers, including those who were unconscious of the new forces at work.

The rapid technical and social change that occurred in the two decades before the war made, or appeared to make, very little impact on the institutions and the individuals who ran the City. The shopocracy - professionals, retailers, merchants and small manufacturers, continued to dominate the Council and local government, the churches, the charities, the schools and the Guardians. The physical appearance of the city refused also to change. The new factories and houses appeared on the outskirts of Coventry, but the centre remained much as it had done for hundreds of years, although a bit more congested. The rapid change in the city's industrial fortunes contrasted with the apparent lack of change in the political control of the city. This unevenness in development meant that there tended to be a division between industrial capital and the small scale local capital. With a few exceptions, industrial capital held itself aloof from the affairs of the city.

The division between employers of labour and the shopocracy - or Coalition as it was later called, initially hindered the growth of the Labour Party. The growth of the labour movement before 1914 was mainly the growth of the unions and the rise in membership and status of the Trades Council. This did not mean that political matters were ignored, for eventually the Trades Council emerged as the body that carried out many of the tasks of a local Labour Party. Nevertheless the labour movement concentrated on meeting the demands of the rapid expansion of engineering, and union organisation was the key task of the times. This

subordination of politics meant that what political activity did take place outside the unions was linked very clearly to them. The Labour Party grew up under the shadow of the Trades Council.

The rapid growth of engineering killed off the tradition among the working class of favouring small scale skilled manufacture to large-scale factory work. Out of it grew a tradition of craft unionism as portrayed by the ASE, the AST and the other skilled unions. But the early tradition had been strong, and some part of it survived, and there was barely time for the craft tradition to develop before it too was threatened.

FOOTNOTES

All works are published in London unless otherwise stated.

Chapter One Coventry Before the First World War.

1. Peter Searby, Weavers and Freemen in Coventry, 1820-1861: Social and Political Traditionalism in an Early Victorian Town (University of Warwick Ph.D. thesis, 1972).
2. J.M.Prest, The Industrial Revolution in Coventry, (Oxford 1970), p.118.
3. W.B.Stephens, ed. Victoria County History of Warwickshire: Vol. VIII, The City of Coventry. See the Chapter, "Crafts and Industries", written by Joan C. Lancaster.
4. James Starley came to the city from Sussex, and together with Josiah Turner started the Coventry Sewing Machine Co. in 1861. This later became the Coventry Machinists Co. and became the first firm in the city to produce bicycles, based on French models. A number of his descendents remained in the cycle trade, and one, J.K.Starley, was responsible for producing the first "safety" bicycle, (as distinct from pennyfarthings etc.) in 1885. He went on to form the Rover Cycle Co. in 1896, and the company turned to the production of motor cars in times of poor trade, and soon built itself up into one of the major motor companies in the country. See George Oliver, The Rover (Cassell 1971), and G.Williamson, Wheels Within Wheels: The Story of the Starleys of Coventry, (locally published) Also Cooper's reminiscences.
5. E.W.Cooper Fifty Years Reminiscences (A collection of newspaper cuttings from 1928 in the Coventry and Warwickshire Collection, Coventry City Libraries). Cooper, (1848-?) claimed to be the twentieth child in a weaving family, and remembered the great strike of 1860. Apprenticed to a blacksmith, he ran away and eventually joined James Starley's works at Cheylesmore, where one of his jobs was to ride cycles round the city to show that it could be done. (He claimed he was the only cyclist in Coventry for a time). He eventually left the cycle trade to become an engineer in a weaving mill. Was also a poet.
6. William, Victor, Allen, Percy, Cecil, Herbert and Stanley Riley, who all seem to have been brothers, all played various parts in building up the Riley bicycle and motor car concerns. Eventually, Victor Riley emerged as the most important figure, and was Chairman and Managing Director of Riley Motors in the late 1920s, when Riley was at the height of its popularity. See G.S.Davison, At the Wheel (1931) which has a chapter on the Riley family.
7. A. Muir, 75 Years: A Record of Progress (Smith's Stamping Works, 1958) p.18.
8. Cooper, op.cit.
9. Machine Tool Review (Published by Alfred Herbert Ltd., Coventry) A bi-monthly publication, in 1954, 1955 and 1956 it carried reminiscences by Sir Alfred Herbert. See in particular Jan/Feb 1954, Mar/Apl 1954, May/June 1954 issues.

10. Basil H.Tripp, Renold Chains (1956) p.123.
11. Cooper, op.cit.
12. Cooper, op. cit.
13. G.C.Allen, The Industrial Development of Birmingham and the Black Country, 1860-1927 (London 1966).
14. Alick S.Hill (1867-1921) Born in Coventry, he founded the Coventry Chain Co. in 1896 with a capital of £300. He was its managing director till his death. He was also involved in a number of other companies, and was Chairman for a time of Smith's Stamping Works. He came from a watchmaking family, and sat on the City Council as a Liberal, and was Mayor of the Corporation in 1916. He was also Vice-President of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce.
15. W.B.Stephens, op.cit. See the Section on Motor-Vehicle Manufacture written by W.B.Stephens, p.181.
16. W.B.Stephens, op.cit., p.180.
17. Armstrong-Siddeley Motors, The Evening and the Morning (Coventry 1957).
18. D.C.Coleman, Courtaulds; an Economic and Social History, Vol. II. (Oxford, 1969) p.31.
19. Census of England and Wales 1911, Occupation Tables, and Census of England and Wales, 1901. (HMSO).
20. City of Coventry Annual Health Report, 1914.
21. Annual Health Report, 1914.
22. Coventry Graphic, October 31, 1913. It is interesting to note that by 1920 the same newspaper had come round to blaming the existence of these slums on trade union restrictions in the building trades, claiming that building unions were "A burden, menace, and encumbrance," (October 8, 1920).
23. Annual Health Report, 1914.
24. Searby, op.cit.
25. Ibid, p.136.
26. John Corbett, The Birmingham Trades Council, 1866-1966, (1966) Chapter three.
27. Coventry Liberal Association, Municipal Committee, Minute Book, entry 24 June 1913.
28. Coventry Perseverance Co-operative Society Ltd., Jubilee History 1867-1917, (Coventry 1917) p.24.
29. Coventry Co-op., op.cit, p.228.
30. Coventry Co-op., op.cit, p.180.

31. Coventry Co-op., op.cit, p.245.
32. G.D.H.Cole, Workshop Organisation, (Oxford, 1923) p.14.
33. Under the premium bonus system, workers were nominally paid day rates, but were given a bonus if they did a job in shorter time than that allowed by the management. The worker was allowed only a portion of the time saved, hence its unpopularity compared to straight piece-work.
34. Coventry and District Engineering Employers Association, Executive Committee Minutes, 25 September 1922.
35. Terms of Working Conditions to be Maintained in Workshops, an agreement signed in August 1910 between the CDEEA and the Coventry District Committees of the ASE, AST, UMWA, UPA and the SEMS. A copy of the agreement is in the collection of the CDEEA.
36. John Chater was a member of the Amalgamated Society of Toolmakers, and eventually rose to become a member of its National Executive Committee. He served as secretary of the Trades Council from 1910 to 1918. He was a member of the ILP and stood unsuccessfully for Council for the Labour Party in 1922.
- 37.. Cole, op.cit, Chapter II, pp.5-20.
38. ASE District Committee, Minutes, 18th, 26th July and 15th, 20th August 1907.
39. W.E.Bullock, a forceful production engineer was Works Manager at Coventry Ordnance 1918 to 1911, and built up a reputation for being anti-union. He left under a cloud and went to Singer Motors, first as Works Manager, and later as Managing Director. He achieved notoriety in 1924 when he held up extensions to Singers' Birmingham plant before the General Election, as he claimed the McKenna duties would destroy the industry. Despite the imposition of the duties, the extensions went quietly ahead after the elections. He was active in the local Employers' Association.
40. A.S.E. District Committee, Minutes 24th September 1907.
41. ASE District Committee, Minutes, 3rd December 1907.
42. Unfortunately, little is known as to the circulation of this newspaper. It was written and produced by a group of ILP members, and seems to have appeared weekly between January 1908 and some time in 1912, when it closed down. There appears to be only a very few cuttings of the paper left, and its influence can only be guessed at. It contained reports of Council meetings, reports of socialist meetings, and ran various campaigns on municipal affairs, as well as carrying cartoons. It must have been a very useful weapon for the labour movement at the time. The most important personality behind the paper was a Mr. Rowland Barrett. See John Yates, Pioneers to Power, (Coventry, 1950), p.37.
43. Workers' Union 9th Annual Report, December 1907 (Birmingham).
44. ASE District Committee, Minutes 20th August 1907.

45. Workers' Union, 14th Annual Report, (Birmingham, December 1912).
46. Workers' Union, 15th Annual Report, (Birmingham, December 1913), p.189.
47. Workers' Union, 15th Annual Report, (Birmingham, December 1913), p.189.
48. Coventry Trades Council, Annual Report for 1913 (Coventry 1914).
49. Quoted in J. Leask, and P.Bellars, 'Nor Shall the Sword Sleep', an account of the Black Country strikes of 1913. (No publication date).
50. Workers' Union, 15th Annual Report. Despite the rapid turnover, the Coventry Workers' Union was one of the strongest in the country. Going by expenditure, the Coventry No. 1 branch was the second largest in the country, and Nos. 2 and 3 branches were also among the largest. Coventry appears to have had more union members than much larger cities such as Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield.
51. Mabbs was a member of the SDF/BSP, and joined the Labour Party probably during the war. He was unsuccessful Labour candidate in the local elections in 1922 and 1923, and in the last year was Chairman of the Labour Party. According to George Hodgkinson he was a powerful and demanding figure, but easily made enemies, and for this reason lost his position in the Labour Party. He was a member of the Minority Movement in the late 1920s.
52. Quoted in D.C.Coleman, Courtaulds; An Economic and Social History, Vol.II, p.162.
53. Ibid.
54. Taken from a file on the National Federation of Women Workers in the TUC library.
55. Trades Council, Annual Report, 1913.
56. All these membership figures are from the Trades Council Annual Report, 1913, which is the only pre-War report surviving.
57. Trades Council, Annual Report. 1913.
58. Trades Council, Annual Report, 1913, Trade Directory of Hours and Rates of Wages.
59. Trades Council, Annual Report, 1913. Copies of other reports for the period have not survived, but the Trades Council has notes based on these reports in its possession.
60. A.Clinton, Draft History of Coventry Trades Council, (ts. 1969).
61. Trades Council, Annual Report, 1913.
62. Trades Council notes on Annual Report 1910. The ban on politics was probably an attempt to frustrate SDF influence on the Trades Council.

63. Trades Council notes on Annual Report 1912.
64. Trades Council, Annual Report, 1913.
65. Notes on Trades Council Report 1909.
66. Trades Council, Annual Report, 1913. The interference came from the Catholic Church.
67. Coventry Socialist and Labour Movement. Collection of reminiscences on the socialist movement and the Labour Party in Coventry by various labour leaders, written in 1949, in the Coventry and Warwickshire collection in the City Library.
68. Ibid, quoted from Frank Sutton's contribution. He was a member of the ILP.
69. John A. Yates, Pioneers to Power (Coventry) 1950, pp.27/28.
70. Based on research by Paul Davis and Paul Watmough at Warwick University.
71. Bannington left the BSP after it adopted an anti-war stance in 1916, served in France for a time, and came back to Coventry to stand as a candidate in the General Election against the Labour Party. See Chapter III. He is believed to have left the city soon after the election.
 Wale was a Labour Councillor both before and after the War, and later became an Alderman. He was not opposed when he stood for election by either Liberal or Conservative in the 1920s, though one of these parties won the seat in the ward in other years. He became President of the Coventry Co-op after he retired from working there. He was also a J.P. Stephen George Poole was a member of the SDF, but switched to the ILP when it was set up. He was a ribbon designer, and became the first Labour Councillor in Coventry in 1908. Before the War he was the acknowledged leader of the Labour Party, but in the 1918 General Election he came out in support of Bannington and severed all his connections with the Party.
 Hook probably left Coventry during the war.
72. Trades Council, Annual Report, 1913.
73. Coventry Labour Party, Annual Report, 1913.
74. T.J.Harris was a toolmaker who worked at Herbert's for 37 years, eventually retiring at the age of 75. Like the other men, he was among the older members of the Party, i.e. he was about fifty when War broke out. After the War he was elected to the City Council in 1919, became an Alderman, J.P., and Mayor in 1933. Barton was secretary of the Labour Party for much of the War, and then appears to have left the city.

CHAPTER TWO

The First World War

Conditions in the engineering and munitions industry created a tremendous growth in trade union membership in these years and created many grievances that stimulated the emergence of a shop stewards movement. There was division within the trade unions as to the form unionism should take, and division over the way skilled workers were treated. The chapter deals with the way the trade unions reacted to the different pressures of war, and deals with the effect of some major strikes on the development of the labour movement.

I Industry at War

In 1914 Coventry's Medical Officer of Health estimated the population to be 119,000. In 1918 his estimate was 133,000, an increase of 14,000 in the war years.⁽¹⁾ This was substantial, but does not give the full picture. During the war, many people lived in the villages in Foleshill Rural District outside the city, or in munitions hutments, while many other workers travelled long distances into Coventry every day. The war years, therefore, accentuated the population growth of the pre-war period.

Because Coventry had established itself as an important engineering centre before the war, it was designated a munitions centre after war broke out, and nearly all of the factories went over to war work. By the end of 1915 the city's industries were on a full war footing.

Some of the car manufacturers remained in vehicle production, albeit for military purposes. The switch-over was quite simple, and gave the

manufacturers an advantage at the end of the war, as they were able to make a rapid transition to peaceful vehicle production. Tractors, ambulances, buses, lorries, field kitchens and tank tracks were all produced in the city. Many of the motor companies began producing aero-engines, and thus established the aircraft industry in the city. Humber also produced aircraft fuselages and parts, and Daimler built the first airfield in the city at the back of its Radford Works.

New factories were established, mainly as subsidiary plants for the companies that already existed in Coventry. Other factories were greatly extended; Daimler increased its manual work-force from 3,800 to 6,000 with 500 non-manual workers. A number of factories were opened to meet ammunition needs; these employed women workers and needed few skilled engineers. Thus White and Poppe opened a Filling Factory in Holbrooks (for the production and filling of shells) employing 2,000 women workers. Coventry Ordnance Works, besides expanding its gun production, opened up another factory near its first for fuse-making, and took on 1,800 women. Rudge Whitworth took on another 1,500 women. Many of these women lived in special camps of hutments to the north of the city.

A new company moved to the city in 1915 - the French machine gun concern of Hotchkiss et Cie, after its French factory had been threatened by the German advance. Its factory in Gosford Street employed about 2,000 workers. Thus the productive capacity of the engineering and allied industries grew very rapidly, while the tendency to large scale production, already pronounced before the war, became even more dominant.

II The Response to the War

The patriotic fervour at the outbreak of war existed among all classes in the city. J.D.Siddeley closed down his works for a short time, and insisted that all his young workers should go off to fight.⁽²⁾ In September 1915, the Coventry Chain Company inaugurated a weekly minimum wage of 35/- payable only to married men.⁽³⁾ The Co-operative Society encouraged its male workers to enlist, and replaced them with women.⁽⁴⁾ A few anti-German incidents occurred; Yates reports the looting of a shop in Lower Stoke owned by a German, while his Birmingham-born wife precipitated a strike when she tried to start work at the BSA factory in Small Heath.⁽⁵⁾

The Derby scheme showed the strength of feeling on the shop floor. The scheme was put into operation in 1915 to avoid compulsory service. Men of military age were asked to attest to their willingness to serve when called upon. In principle the scheme was a voluntary one; in practice there was widescale intimidation. Management threatened to sack workers who refused to attest, but the initiative in most workplaces was taken by the workers themselves, who in many cases went on strike or refused to work with non-attestors; in a number of cases workers were attacked by fellow-workers. George Hodgkinson, who was a pacifist, gives a vivid account of the pressures that were put on him to attest, but points out it did not stop his shop electing him as its first shop steward a year later.⁽⁶⁾

For most people, the political tone of the period was set by the local newspapers, and these were fiercely anti-German throughout the war. The Midland-Daily Telegraph made it clear that it would not publish the views of people it felt were lacking in patriotism,⁽⁷⁾ and for a time tried to

censor news about industrial unrest. At the time of the May 1917 strikes, which were not reported, the editorial confessed "It is particularly hard at times to avoid the making of some admission or the publication of some report calculated to serve the enemy's purpose."⁽⁸⁾ Whether the German High Command regularly scrutinised the Midland Daily Telegraph as its editor appeared to think is a matter of some conjecture, but fortunately for them, and for historians, national newspapers were less scrupulous, and as strikes got national coverage, the Telegraph's self-denying ordinance soon lapsed.

Although, at least for the first few years, the overwhelming majority of the population gave complete support to the prosecution of the war effort, the war caused a number of upsets in the political life of the city. The sitting Liberal M.P., D.M. Mason, declared himself a pacifist and against the war, and was disowned by the Liberal Party who found a pro-war candidate to oppose him at the next election. The leaders of the three political parties issued a joint statement repudiating Mason's claim to represent the city. This caused a row in the Labour Party, for the statement had been signed by Harry Wale, its President, without his consulting the rest of the Executive. In fact, many members of the Labour Party, and the whole of the ILP were against the war, though to different degrees.

In the labour movement, some of those who opposed the war did so because they saw it as the result of imperialism. Others opposed all wars in principle, and refused to co-operate in any way with the military authorities. Many others, however, were like Ramsay MacDonald in that they deplored the fact of war, and wanted a negotiated settlement, but also felt that while it was on the war must be won. Thus MacDonald felt able to join in recruiting campaigns, though this did not stop him from

being the object of attack from many quarters. In Coventry, the Labour movement divided into men like Harry Wale who had no hesitation in giving whole-hearted support for the war, and who played an important part in recruitment campaigns in the city, a small group of pacifists, and a larger group who took MacDonald's position. In this last group was Dick Wallhead, one of the most well known ILP orators in the country, who had been adopted by the Coventry Labour Party to fight the next election. Not surprisingly, there was a fierce battle in the local party. T.J.Harris complained "Pacifists and Pro-war alike were each more concerned with using the Party as an instrument for their respective policies, than preparing it for the day of reckoning."⁽⁹⁾ Poole, the pre-war leader of the Party, came out in favour of the war, and thus severed his connection with the ILP, who returned the portrait they had of him.

For a long time, the Labour Party avoided making a definite statement on the war. In 1914 an Executive resolution stated "That the Party, whilst expressing no opinion with regard to the merits or demerits of the present European crisis, declares that it is the bounden duty of all citizens to support by every means in their power the efforts put forward by the Government to alleviate the distress inevitably arising."⁽¹⁰⁾ Although the Labour Party records do not exist for most of the war, it appears that it gradually came round to an anti-war point of view, for at one public meeting in 1916, Wale attacked pacifists in the Party whom he claimed were trying to drive him out, and he threatened to stand in the next elections as an Independent.

After a number of meetings, a delegate conference of the Labour Party in 1916 heard Wallhead's position and decided to "Pledge its unfailing

support" to him.⁽¹¹⁾ However, it did not give open support to his views, and was able to support Wallhead on the one hand and join with the other political parties on the other hand in sponsoring recruitment rallies in the city. Also in 1916, Wale resigned from the Presidency of the Labour Party, and was replaced by T.J.Harris who showed more interest in keeping the Party together. In August 1917 a national Labour Party Conference agreed to push for a negotiated peace and the resurrection of the Second International, and this ended the most serious splits in the party.

Although the Labour Party organised protests against the terms of conscription, the shortage of food, speculators, and national service, it did not flourish in the war years. Affiliations of trade union branches increased, but activity declined. The 1916 Report commented that "the Party has been condemned to a policy of marking time," and attendance at the monthly delegate meetings became so poor that the possibility of amalgamation with the Trades Council was discussed.⁽¹²⁾ The Liberals and the Conservatives had more or less gone into voluntary liquidation, and there were no elections to fight. It therefore had no role to play, despite the fact that working class struggles were increasing in intensity. By 1918 the Labour Party had still not won a place of leadership or authority in the local labour movement.

The ILP did not regard itself as bound by the political truce in the city. However it was only active in fits and starts. Like the other parties, it lost members through conscription and long hours of work. In the early years of the war it remained inactive, presumably because it felt the political climate was not opportune. However, in 1916 and 1917 it organised a number of well-attended meetings, addressed by national leaders, and supplemented them with regular outdoor meetings.⁽¹³⁾ From

April 1917 onwards, it suffered a marked decline in activity, and the Party made no organised intervention in the big strikes in the city. Doubtlessly, individual members at that time placed more importance on their trade union activity than on Party activity.

The BSP did not survive the war in the city. H.M. Hyndman had been in control of the Party for many years, and tried in 1914 to commit it to support the war. He was opposed by the majority, and after a conference in 1916 had reversed his policy, he and his supporters left the BSP, taking its newspaper with them. Most of the support for Hyndman came from the Midlands, including Coventry. In the city, Arthur Bannington had played the role of a local Hyndman, and won most of the local BSP to his position. By 1917 he had a group of socialist ex-servicemen operating in the city, very pro-war, and very opposed to the ILP. BSP members may have survived in the city, but there was no sign of them after the war as an organised group.

The Military Services Act, the Defence of the Realm Act, and the Munitions Act were seized on by some employers to intimidate their workers into higher production. Men found slacking at work ended up before Munitions Tribunals, where they were fined, and threatened with conscription. Workmen who tried to take one Saturday in four off work were fined by the courts, despite the fact that the employers concerned and their supervisors always had the weekends off, while dozens of women regularly found themselves in court being fined for lateness.⁽¹⁴⁾ One firm, White & Poppe brought so many prosecutions against its workforce that it tried to save time by getting the Munitions Tribunal to meet at its premises.⁽¹⁵⁾

One celebrated case that created a stir in the city was the prosecution of a local Workers' Union official, George Morris, under DORA for withdrawing

workers who were not getting the full rate at the Ordnance Works. He was sentenced to three months hard labour by the magistrates, whose chairman felt "they have a duty to the nation and the Empire to perform." In fact the employers were breaking the Munitions Act by not paying the men the skilled rate, and this was admitted at quarter sessions when Morris appealed. His sentence was quashed, but he was still obliged to pay £5. The case aroused great concern in the trade unions in the city.⁽¹⁶⁾

A more vicious case received less publicity. A Belgian who had been in the city as an engineering worker since 1915, and had been sacked from the Ordnance Works for being a revolutionary, was prosecuted under DORA for circulating a pamphlet headed "To the Toiling Masses of France, Britain, America and Japan," signed by Lenin, Trotsky, and Chicherin. The prosecution claimed it was a secret revolutionary document, but the Chairman of the magistrates pointed out that it had appeared in the newspapers and that he himself had read it. The prosecution case was then to establish that the man was a revolutionary, and this succeeded. The Chairman of the magistrates, in sentencing him to six months, declared "It was not a political crime, but a wicked attempt to bring this country into the condition of Russia." One of the magistrates in the case was Wale. Although it received attention among left-wingers, the case did not produce an outcry, and the man had to serve his sentence.⁽¹⁷⁾

Other left-wingers to feel the weight of the law were members of the ILP. The Party was allowed to hold meetings, but they were sometimes stopped by the police who would check that there were no people avoiding military service in the audience.

Support for the war effort was not incompatible with hostility to those responsible for its organisation. As the war went on there was

increasing dislike of the profiteering, food shortages, conscription, new laws, restrictions on trade union activity, and bureaucratic delay that accompanied it. Throughout the later stages of the war, there was a growing conviction in the trade unions in particular, that the working class was bearing the brunt, and that others were profiting from its sacrifice. This feeling was particularly strong over the acute shortage of food in the city, which coincided with steep increases in prices. Clearly someone was doing very well out of the war.

Food shortages were not peculiar to Coventry; the Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest, in its report in 1917 said that some shortages had been widespread, and the accompanying price increases were "the universal and most important cause of unrest."⁽¹⁹⁾ Food prices nationally doubled between the summer of 1914 and the summer of 1917, and this naturally caused a sense of grievance, particularly in 1917.

In January 1915, the Trades Council called on the Government to take control of food supply and to fix maximum prices, and organised a demonstration over the issue. There was not much popular support for such action in the earlier days of the war however. Wallhead criticised the "apathy of the mass of the people" at a poorly attended Labour Party protest meeting in November 1916.⁽²⁰⁾ In 1917, however, the continual rise in prices was combined with shortages. Government price controls in the short term contributed to the scarcity of sugar, butter, margarine, potatoes and meat. The situation in Coventry appeared to be particularly bad as it seemed that the city was getting only enough food to feed the pre-war population despite the fact that many more people were shopping in the city.

Early in 1917, the WU began to push for either an increase in wages

of £1 a week, or a 50% reduction in food prices, but it was soon generally agreed by the unions that the food issue had to be treated separately, and a campaign was launched to get price control and control of supplies.⁽²¹⁾ The situation took a serious turn when beer supplies began to dry up. The ASE DC passed a resolution complaining of inadequate supplies. The West Midlands Division of the Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest reported that its members "were frankly amazed at the strength of the objections to the Liquor Restrictions," saying they came from teetotalers as well as drinkers. Its report called for more drink, and an immediate reduction in food prices as an essential step.⁽²²⁾ Arising out of these reports J.R.Clynes was appointed Food Controller, and began to impose maximum prices on a wide range of commodities. A local Food Control Committee was set up with representatives from retailers, the local authority, the Co-op, the Labour Party and the Trades Council. It is interesting to note that the labour movement organisations did not primarily blame the retailers for the price increases, but denounced speculating wholesalers and producers. They were able to join amicably with retailers' representatives on joint deputations to London.

In the second part of the year, food shortages got worse. Retailers began their own rationing, long queues appeared outside many shops, and men and women left work early to join them. The local Food Committee did not try, as some others did, to impose its own local rationing, but sent a deputation to London asking for a national scheme.

The local trade unions decided to take independent action, and the CEJC called a strike on Saturday November 19, which meant that the strikers were for the most part losing a full day. Nearly all the factories shut down on the day, 10,000 people joined a march, and an estimated 40,000

attended a meeting in Gosford Green. A resolution was passed calling for full Government control over commodities and a price reduction of 50%. Further action was threatened if the demands were not met, but after the Government took steps to see that the supply of food to the city was increased, no further action was taken.

The demonstration and strike was of considerable significance. It showed that organised labour had taken the lead on the issue, and had succeeded in uniting most of the city behind its demands. For many workers, it was the first time they had been called out on strike, and for probably all workers it was the first time they had used their power over food prices. Workers were prepared to co-operate with retailers and others in the campaign, but were not afraid of taking independent action as well.

The strike was also significant, as it was used as a demonstration of the strength of the shop stewards, who led the contingents from the various factories. As the local employers were refusing to recognise the stewards, the strike was an open show of the stewards' power, and a threat of what might happen.

The labour movement campaign for lower prices continued into 1918, but there were no more threats of strike action. It concentrated on trying to increase labour representation on the local Food Committee, and obtaining further restraints on price increases. The wage increases in 1917 and 1918 defused the issue to some extent, and the shortages that occurred in the autumn of 1917 were not repeated.

The Co-op naturally was particularly concerned with the rise in food prices, and claimed it was especially hit by shortages. Membership of the society rose by over 3,000 in the first two years of the war, but it

was only allocated food at its pre-war level. The Co-op felt that other retailers were trying to restrict its activities, and in return called on food distributors to bypass retailers, and issue food direct to consumers. The Co-op was also attacked by the Excess Profits Tax which was supposed to hit those people making money out of the war. It was decided that the Co-op dividend was profit, though the Co-op claimed the money was owned by the individual members of the Society, which could not be treated as a capitalist concern. As a result of these taxes, the dividend fell from 2s 6d in the pound to 2s despite the growth in membership and turnover.⁽²³⁾

Having been made to pay out tax on its "profits", the Co-op was subject to a greater embarrassment in 1918 when it had to supply food and provisions to the four hundred seamen that accompanied Havelock Wilson on his strike-breaking errand to the city during the Embargo strike. George Jarrams, the Co-op secretary, complained to the Divisional Food Commission that as "The membership of the Society is composed almost entirely of the artisan class" they may not be expected to approve of this. Further, the Board of Management protested "against the use of the Society's supplies of food for the purpose of assisting any person or persons engaged ostensibly in interference in Industrial disputes," and asked that in any similar cases the Co-op be left out of supply arrangements.⁽²⁴⁾ By the end of the war the Co-op had been pushed into a position where it had to defend itself against other retailers and attacks generally, by closer links with organised labour. Moreover, it claimed to feed half the population of the area, so continued to be an example of successful working class initiative. Nevertheless, it remained a passive body, uncertain of its relationship with the labour movement.

III Housing Problems

It was not difficult to make extra food supplies available to the city, and rising wages allowed people to survive rising prices, hence the food situation in the city came to only a brief crisis, and then subsided. The housing shortage was more difficult to deal with, and the labour movement could not be mobilised around this issue so easily. The housing shortage was due primarily to the rapid influx of new workers into the city. The situation had already been difficult before the war, and continued to deteriorate throughout the war years. It was made more difficult by the reluctance of the City Council to build up a stock of publicly owned dwellings in the years before the war. By 1914 Council property amounted to only 179 houses and 22 flats, in Stoke and Foleshill. The situation was also made worse by a strike of building workers in May 1914. This was one of the longest strikes to have taken place in the city. It lasted over two months and involved about 2,000 workers. It resulted in a big step forward for building workers' organisation in the city, for it achieved recognition for the Building Trades Federation and ¹/₂d an hour increase, but by the time the strike was settled, men were already leaving to join the armed forces, and the shortage of labour was not made up for the next four years, as the munitions factories could offer higher wages. On top of this, shortages of materials soon occurred.

As a result, there was a reduction in the number of houses completed in Coventry from 927 in 1914 to 251 in 1918.⁽²⁵⁾ At the same time the programme of clearing unfit houses slowed down, as there was no alternative accommodation. In 1914 116 houses were inspected and 54 closed down, but in 1918 only 2 were inspected and none closed.⁽²⁶⁾ Thus the house shortage condemned a number of people to live in sub-standard conditions.

To meet the demand for accommodation, some landlords began to open large lodging houses or hostels. Only those places described as Common Lodging Houses were subject to Council inspection, and although most were reasonably run, some gave cause for concern. In 1916, the Annual Health Report referred to one lodging house which had been a factory and which had been refused a certificate because of inferior lighting, ventilation, closet accommodation and yard pavement. Despite the fact that it was never certified, and the owner was fined £5 in 1917, the hostel remained open throughout the war years, sleeping 126 men a night. There were also some 42 houses let as lodgings which "appear to be conducted more or less as Common Lodging Houses" but were not subject to any inspection by the local authority. They housed about 1,000 people.⁽²⁷⁾

Another indication of overcrowding was the steady rise in the density of population, from 25.8 per acre in 1911 to 32 in 1918, while the average number of persons to each occupied house rose from 4.5 in 1913 to 4.8 in 1918.⁽²⁸⁾ As a result of overcrowding, many who wanted housing had to make do with lodgings, and many who wanted lodgings had to make do with a place in the hostels and municipal hutments that were erected north of the city and became an eyesore in the years after the war. The pressure on homes was so great that a survey in 1920, after the height of the pressure had been passed, showed that one house in five in the city was taking in lodgers, despite the fact that the large majority of houses were small working class dwellings.⁽²⁹⁾ Fortunately, the general condition of Coventry houses was good, as most of the housing stock was less than twenty years old, and the slums were mostly confined to about 1,000 back-to-back houses in the 339 small courts that existed in the city centre. The Medical Officer of Health claimed that Coventry "probably possesses a larger proportion of modernly built houses than any other large town in the country."⁽³⁰⁾

Nevertheless overcrowding had its problems, and produced its strange bedfellows. When Poole publicly claimed there were "beds which were never cold" and rooms hired in shifts, he was denounced in the local press.⁽³¹⁾ Hodgkinson, who had moved to Coventry in 1914, knew the truth of the statement, for he had to share a bed with another; "We did not occupy the bed together, but in shifts, sleeping 'box and cox' according to the vernacular. Coming off the night shift I had to hop into a bed already warmed from the body which had been in occupation during the night. This was bad enough, but one morning after lying in bed for a while the plaster fell from the ceiling covering the bed like a blanket. I was too tired to get up, there was no alternative bed in any case, and I slept in that situation until the afternoon. Upon wakening, my throat was like a lime kiln, my breathing organs clogged up with the dust caused by the falling ceiling."⁽³²⁾ This incident obviously had a profound effect on Hodgkinson, for in his next sentence he wrote "The incident set me furiously thinking about marriage." As a sober young man he had saved £50, and he and his newly-wed wife were able to purchase shares in a housing association, and rent their own house, but most young workers did not have that kind of money. Those who could not find any accommodation in the city had to live outside, and endure what were sometimes very long journeys on top of the long hours of work.

In the early days of the war, the housing shortage pushed rents up, and a protest movement began to develop. The Trades Council, which had years of experience of lobbying on housing, began to agitate for a rent strike in 1914. It underestimated the difficulties involved, and overestimated the strength of feeling, for its Annual Report, referring to a strike ballot said "the number voting was so small that we can only conclude that the workers of Coventry are perfectly satisfied with their housing conditions."⁽³³⁾

The fault lay not with the workers, but with the Trades Council for pursuing such an unrealistic policy.

Later in 1915, agitation began in a different form, and the Trades Council was able to establish a Tenants Defence League as a subcommittee of the Council to lead the struggle against rent increases, and to lobby for rent controls. Before the struggle could reach a critical stage, the Rent (War Restrictions Act) of 1915 was passed which limited rents to their pre-war levels. This effectively ended protests against rent increases, except for occupants of new houses, which were not covered by the law. The Tenants Defence League remained in existence, publicising the Act and giving legal aid to tenants with recalcitrant landlords. It is significant that what action had been taken by the labour movement was taken under the auspices of the Trades Council rather than the Labour Party, which was not inactive on the subject, but which lacked the standing and strength of the Trades Council.

The Rent Act ended most of the protest, but did not solve the troubles that developed on the new estate at Stoke Heath. It was a measure of the acuteness of the housing shortage in the city that the Ministry of Munitions asked the Council to build this estate, for it meant diverting men and materials from the war effort, and it was a measure of the Council's attitude that it did nothing until it was pushed into it by the Ministry. Most munitions houses were temporary dwellings, but as the Housing Committee pointed out, "In view of the acknowledged shortage of houses which has existed in Coventry for a number of years, and which is estimated by the (Local Government) Board at at least one thousand houses,⁽³⁴⁾ they would build 600 permanent homes. The Ministry was to be responsible for getting the contracts but the land and houses would belong to the city, giving it

its first sizeable council estate.

As was to be expected, the Council had its doubts, pointing out that "the present is a very unfavourable time for building, owing to the high cost of materials and labour" and that "the rents will of course, have to be based upon the actual cost of the scheme when ascertained."⁽³⁵⁾ With this proviso, the scheme was agreed, and the houses were built at 14 to the acre compared with 22 in previous Council building. (Most private working class housing estates were between 22 and 26 to the acre). In the end, 599 houses and 10 shops were built at Stoke Heath, near the Ordnance Works, and virtually all of the first tenants worked at the Ordnance, as that company was allowed to select the tenants. The houses were built quickly - too quickly as was later found out - and the estate was filled by the autumn of 1916. Within a few weeks the first organised protests began.

The basic grievance was the high rents, though later there were complaints about the standard of the buildings. The rents were set at 9/6d., 10/6d., and 11/6d., depending on the size of the house, which meant they were 2/- dearer than other council houses in Stoke, although they were basically the same type. The Council claimed they were charging an economic rent because the housing costs were greater due to war conditions. This was misleading, however, as the Ministry had paid a grant of 20% to meet the higher costs. The Stoke Heath Tenants Defence Association claimed that the total costs were 30% higher than pre-war costs, so the extra cost to the Council was only 10%, while rents were 25% higher.⁽³⁶⁾ The argument was complicated, for the Council could not put a figure to the final costs for a very long time, and this enraged the tenants who felt there was a cover-up going on. Poole, who was the only member of the Housing Committee to back the tenants, said at one point "I have every sympathy with the tenants'

protest against the rents, which are excessive, but the citizens generally are not in possession of the facts that have led up to the present points.⁽³⁷⁾ The problem was that the Housing Committee was not in possession of the facts either. It was not until early 1919 that the Housing Committee made any definite statements about the cost of the scheme, and even then it did not give enough information.

The Housing Committee had no intention of subsidising the estate, and no attempt was made to get money from the Coventry Ordnance Works despite the fact that they were clearly beneficiaries of the scheme. Poole alleged that the high rents owed something to the fact that costs on the other small estates were going up, but the rents were fixed, and so the Housing Committee was compensating itself by charging extra at Stoke Heath.⁽³⁸⁾

The fact that the tenants were all recruited from the one factory meant that the union leaders at work became the union leaders at home. This meant that the Tenants' Association was able to begin work quickly, and hold the support of the mass of the tenants. An experienced and capable leadership existed, and the Association affiliated to the Tenants' Defence League run by the Trades Council. It quickly threatened a rent strike, and achieved a reduction in the rents of 6d. a week shortly after the estate was opened.

This was only the start, for the tenants wanted much bigger reductions. A number of meetings were held in the spring of 1917 with the Housing Committee without any settlement, so in early May the Association conducted a referendum which showed an overwhelming majority of tenants were prepared to back a rent strike.⁽³⁹⁾ Leaders of the Association, at a public meeting attended by the majority of tenants, claimed that the Council were including the interest charges and the costs of the new roads in the rents.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Failing

to receive satisfaction, the threatened rent strike began on May 12th.

The Housing Committee circulated all tenants, claiming that any rent adjustment would have to wait until the scheme had operated for a year, and threatening distraint and eventual eviction to tenants refusing to pay rent.⁽⁴¹⁾ This clearly did not have the desired effect, for a few days later the rent collectors called on three hundred houses and collected only two payments. All the other houses displayed notices saying "Rent Strike in progress, Collector need not call." The collectors were followed by pickets, who were successful in persuading the two defaulters to join the strike, though it took a group of tenants burning his effigy to persuade one of them.⁽⁴²⁾ The Association called this rowdiness, and the next time collectors were in the area, they were accompanied by two delegates from the Association who merely took the names of the very few who paid.

In the face of this united front, the Housing Committee backed down, a Sub-Committee met representatives of the Association, and notwithstanding all previous talk of it being impossible to reduce rents further, agreed with the representatives to remove another 1/1d. from the rents. This left the Stoke Heath rents about 5d. a week above other rents, and although it was less than the tenants had asked for, it was still a substantial victory. A meeting of 1,200 tenants accepted the offer unanimously, and called off the rent strike, which had lasted two weeks.⁽⁴³⁾

The rent strike occurred just after the May 1917 strikes in the city, and was a reflection of the militancy that existed at that time. It represented an important broadening out of the economic struggles of working people, and a wider political understanding of the trade unionists who helped run the Tenants' Association. This was consolidated in December 1917,

when not only the Stoke Heath Tenants, but the Tenants Defence Association at St. Georges Road and Severn Road, (other Council dwellings) declared that they would pay no rent during the strike for shop steward recognition. (44) So tenants' associations came to be seen as part of the organisation of the labour movement, and the struggles of council tenants were linked to other labour movement struggles.

The troubles at Stoke Heath did not go away. It soon became clear that the houses had not been properly constructed - a number of tenants had their ceilings collapse on them - and later disputes were more serious and had a greater impact on the City Council, particularly the rent strike at the end of 1918.

This was the only rent strike in the city during the war, so the linking of industrial and non-industrial struggles was on only a small scale. It marked the beginnings of a consciousness of a separate community in Stoke Heath, which suffered heavily from unemployment and repressive poor law administration after the war. For the rest of the city, however, the industrial struggle was the key factor in developing the nature of the labour movement.

IV Unions and Shop Stewards

Trade Unions grew rapidly during the war years. Recruitment had been high before the war, but the number of trade unionists in the city doubled in these years. There were about 13,000 workers affiliated to the Trades Council in 1913; by 1919 this affiliation was 27,457 while there were several thousand in branches not affiliated. (45) Membership of the ASE went up by a half to 4,000, but membership of the AST went up much more

rapidly, and was about 7,000 in 1919. Most of the other craft unions, except brassworkers, saw substantial gains, but the biggest increase was in the membership of the Workers' Union, which went from just over 2,800 to over 8,000.⁽⁴⁶⁾ The WU not only recruited unskilled and semi-skilled workers, but some skilled as well, and this was a source of great dissatisfaction in the ranks of the ASE and AST.

Some of the members of the WU were women, while other women workers joined the National Federation of Women Workers, which had 1,000 members in 1919. However, many women had left industrial work by 1919, so we do not know the extent of unionisation among women in the war; generally, it seems to have been a lot lower than men. It also needs to be borne in mind that while trade unionism grew during the war, there were very few closed shops. Some factories were very poorly organised still, and there were thousands of men and women workers not in trade unions.

Coventry trade unionists did not hold different attitudes to the war from the rest of the population. They were for the most part prepared to accept in 1915 the Treasury Agreement and later the Munitions Act by which they gave up the right to strike, opposition to dilution and all forms of restrictive practises for the period of the duration of the war. George Ryder, the ASE ODD for the area was voicing the feeling of most when he wrote

"We are faced with the alternatives of sacrificing for the time being certain principles and activities which are of vital importance to us in normal times, or of sacrificing the lives of our comrades and endangering the success of the allied troops by a rigid adherence to such principles and activities, and I am confident that for the vast majority of our members the former alternative is the only possible one." (47)

Most of the engineering unions in Coventry were affiliated to the

Coventry Engineering Joint Committee, which was made up of delegates from the different district committees, or branches in the case of small unions. When the ASE DC decided to join, in April 1916, it demanded as a condition of membership that vital issues could be settled only by card vote, and this was accepted.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Soon the only sizable union that was outside the CEJC was the WU. This wanted to join, but was held up, primarily by the ASE, which wanted to make a condition that all skilled engineers would have to be transferred to the ASE. The insistence by the ASE and other unions that only they could speak for the skilled and their determination to hold on to their craft privileges which in some cases had been underwritten by the Munitions Act was a source of constant division between them and the WU.

In the early stages of the war, various individual disputes occurred over the detailed application of dilution, but the principle was accepted by union leaders, and in separate ballots conducted by the CEJC and the ASE, by union members. Military service did not worry the skilled unions; when the District Committee of Birmingham ASE asked the Coventry Committee to join it in action against the calling up of skilled workers, it replied that it had no problems. Skilled workers in the city showed support for the Sheffield workers when one of their members was called up, and threatened to hold up dilution until the issue was settled. They accepted the Trade Card scheme that settled the dispute without any complaints.

The first incident to arouse considerable anger in the city against the authorities in their application of the war legislation was the prosecution of George Morris. As already mentioned, his sentence was eventually reduced to a fine of £5, and had this not occurred it is likely that a strike would have taken place. Even an ASE aggregate meeting voted for a strike.

(This meeting was attended by some special constables, but after a discussion the meeting courteously allowed them to remain),(49) On the evening of the day the appeal was heard, about a thousand ASE members gathered ~~in~~^{at} the District Offices, and although no meeting had been arranged, the DC felt it had better hurriedly convene one. The meeting passed a resolution protesting at the fine at a time "while the employing classes are allowed to evade the provisions embodied in the Acts of Parliament to safeguard the workers who had loyally forgone their hard won rights for the Benefit of the Country." When it was discovered that an anonymous benefactor had paid the fine for Morris, an amendment to the resolution was passed criticising this action and threatening non-co-operation with the authorities unless Morris was given a free pardon.(50) The threat was not carried out, but the meeting gave a clear indication of the feelings of many workers; they felt that they were making all the sacrifices while others made the profits. From the time of this incident (January 1917) onwards, workers, while not for the most part attacking the assumptions behind Government policy, were much more open to the idea of fighting the application of these policies.

Thus when strikes swept through the munition centres in May 1917, Coventry was included. The cause of the strikes was the Government decision to abolish the Trade Card protection scheme which had only been brought into operation a few months earlier, and the decision to extend dilution to private work as well as munition work. There was very little private work in Coventry, but feeling was running high in the city anyway, as the latest Committee on Production pay increase had not applied in full to Coventry workers. The strike in Coventry is of interest for it brought out into the open the activity of the unofficial Shop Stewards and Workers' Committee

Movement in the city.

The history of this movement can be found elsewhere.⁽⁵¹⁾ In Coventry the leading lights were members of the small group of SLP members together with others mainly of a syndicalist leaning. They were supported by the leaders of the Amalgamation Committee which had existed in the years before the war without having had much influence. The local leader was Tom Dingley,⁽⁵²⁾ who was helped by various militants from elsewhere who spent some time in the city - men like William Paul and Arthur McManus. The Times later tried to make something sinister out of the natural displacements that arose out of the war by claiming that a band of workers from Clydeside "formed a nucleus of turbulent spirits which sought to force the trade unionists of Coventry into Red Revolt."⁽⁵³⁾

The Coventry Workers Committee had little influence until early 1917 when it helped establish a Shop Stewards Committee at the Hotchkiss works where Dingley worked. The aim of the movement was the complete organisation of all workers based on the workshop, through shop committees, Works Committees, local committees and a National Committee, known as the National Administrative Council. The most important principles were direct representation at all levels, and all responsibility vested in the rank and file. The ultimate aim was the overthrow of capitalism, primarily through industrial struggle. Many in the SS&WCM saw little that was good in the existing trade unions. Dingley was particularly hostile to them, declaring,

"I aver that the old trade union has not only served its purpose and outlived its usefulness, but that it is now positively reactionary, and is maintained, not in the interests of the workers who support it, but in the interests of the capitalist class." (54)

This hostility to unions meant that Dingley and his supporters did not work within the existing unions but preferred to build up alternative structures,

although in practice they carried union cards, normally WU ones. This meant that the relations between the out-and-out revolutionaries and the militants who accepted the trade unions were not very strong. It was thus comparatively easy for the revolutionaries to be isolated from the struggles inside the trade unions, and eventually from the rank and file.

At the time of the outbreak of war, local union officials did not envisage much scope for shop stewards. The ASE had approached other unions to see if it was possible to strengthen stewards, and it was generally accepted that the steward system needed to be expanded. But in early 1917 the local unions did not want stewards to be elected by members of different unions, nor did they want stewards to have powers to call industrial action. The ASE DC rejected the Clydeside system of shop stewards and works committees, claiming they had been failures. In practice, this meant that the strengthening of the stewards was not seen as a priority, and so official action lagged behind unofficial. A meeting in February 1917 of ASE members at the best organised plant in the city, the Ordnance Works, revealed very uneven organisation there. Different times and rates were accepted in the different departments, some of whom had stewards, some not. One steward claimed he had to represent 600 men.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Yet only a fortnight later the unofficial movement had called a strike at the Hotchkiss factory for the recognition of the new Shop Committee there.

The Hotchkiss was "a magnet for the rebels" and had a number of short stoppages in 1917.⁽⁵⁶⁾ On 6th April there was a one day strike to get all toolroom work done outside the toolroom at the proper rate. The CEJC and the Managing Director quickly settled this, but the Shop Committee, which had Dingley as one of the joint convenors, then raised the issue of recognition and when this was not granted took the workers out again, where they

remained until 11th April.⁽⁵⁷⁾ This brought the "irresponsible shop committee" as the CEJC insisted on calling it, into direct conflict with the official unions for they told their members to stay at work. Alf Doherty, the District Chairman of the ASE also worked at Hotchkiss, and only stopped work when he was forced to by the strikers.⁽⁵⁸⁾ On the 10th, he hit back, for he managed to organise a meeting of only ASE and AST members in the factory and get a vote to return to work. The rest of the workers returned the next day, after an agreement had been signed to hold recognition talks.⁽⁵⁹⁾ This was signed also by Doherty, though he claimed he was acting only as a witness. At a local conference called to consider the situation, it was reported that CEJC delegates

"Were unanimous in expressing their disapproval of the movement and its organisers, who were simply trying to usurp the powers of the duly authorised local trade union officials. They united in encouraging the management to ignore absolutely the self-called Shop Committee." ⁽⁶⁰⁾

This attitude enabled the Ministry of Munitions to forge an uneasy alliance of State, unions and Management to defeat the unofficial shop committee. It was agreed to set up a joint shop stewards committee approved by the unions and recognised by management, with very circumscribed powers. This was opposed by the militants, but was set up anyway, and for a time there were two committees operating at the Hotchkiss, with the militant committee mainly confined to the fitting shop. This was the first time that the unions had allowed this sort of joint committee to operate, and it set them thinking of spreading the idea. It was also the first time a local employer had accepted a shop stewards committee, and although the scheme was seen as an alternative to a more militant approach, the Hotchkiss management remained unhappy. The Ministry of Munitions official commented

"Even that committee, (i.e. the official Hotchkiss one), mild as it was, and non-executive in its powers, did not receive a welcome from the local employers, and the Department is being blamed somewhat by them for giving its blessing." (61)

Although forced onto the defensive at the Hotchkiss, the unofficial movement registered an important success in bringing out the workers in the May strikes. Trade Cards had been issued to every skilled worker in munitions, and served as a guarantee of exemption from military service, so the threat of their withdrawal primarily affected skilled men. This was certainly how the ASE saw it, and in Coventry the DC tried to get a National Conference called to consider united action on the question, and their newly-appointed full-time district secretary, Walter Givens, was sent on a tour of the country to get support for the idea. A packed aggregate meeting of the ASE resolved that it stood for

"The retention of the Trade Card or its equivalent, at whatever cost and hereby pledges itself to resist to the utmost the taking of any of our members into the Army so long as a single diluted unit remains in our trade." (62)

This sectional outlook was very different from that of the militants, many of whom were the "diluted units" referred to, yet it was the Coventry Workers' Committee which took the initiative in calling the strikes.

The CEJC and the ASE learnt that the Workers' Committee was holding strike ballots in a number of factories, and circulars were sent out opposing this. The ASE circular said "Notices to strike issued by any body other than the District Committee could not be approved or recognised by the Society, and instructing shop stewards to influence members to remain at work." At the same time as the circular was being distributed the majority of workers in the city were stopping work. (63)

The Workers' Committee had brought the men out on Tuesday 8th May, but

could not keep them out. On Wednesday, an aggregate meeting of the ASE voted by 2,000 to 100 to return to work, and many others also went back after a day. Other unions were not so prompt, and the CEJC found it difficult to decide on a policy; it was in session Wednesday afternoon and all day Thursday. The majority of officials did not want a strike, but the AST and UMWA did.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Eventually, the majority view was accepted, and a mass meeting at Highfield Road football ground was held on Sunday, where it was agreed, by the twenty thousand or so who were present, that those who were still on strike should return on Monday 14th May. So while perhaps the majority of workers had gone back after one day, a substantial number had been out for five.

A Ministry of Munitions official at the time commented that the Workers' Committee contained "more of the ultra-socialist and pacifist type than of the shop steward type,"⁽⁶⁵⁾ but this was somewhat misleading. On this occasion, a number of the officers of some of the unions were working for a continuation of the strike, and even a few of the District Committee of the ASE. Not all of these gave their allegiance to the Workers' Committee, but that body did have a nucleus of shop stewards to guide its affairs. The strike accentuated the differences between left and right on some District Committees. On the ASE DC Alex Maddison and a couple of others were working for a continuation of the strike, while Doherty, Ainsbury and Givens, with the backing of the majority, were touring the Midlands seeking to persuade others either not to strike or else go back to work.⁽⁶⁶⁾ Doherty and Givens reported from Leicester that "their presence and speeches had much influence in keeping Leicester members at work."⁽⁶⁷⁾ However, the militants in the Workers' Committee who had made no effort to get on District Committees, were isolated from this struggle.

Strikes continued in many other parts of the country during the week after the last Coventry workers went back, and they gained a fresh impetus when 10 out of the unofficial leaders were arrested on 17th May, with several new districts joining in. Despite the fact that two of those arrested came from Coventry (Dingley and Neil Cassidy⁽⁶⁸⁾ from the Ordnance Works) there was no further strike action in the city. The WU, to which the two belonged, refrained from immediate action but resolved to organise a concerted strike if the prosecution of the 10 resulted in convictions. The ASE held an aggregate meeting, but decided not to take action; the meeting refused to listen to a speaker from the unofficial Walworth Conference - the DC having earlier decided not to send a delegate.⁽⁶⁹⁾ The release of those held in custody after a couple of days removed the possibility of further strike action, and also led to a national settlement.

The lesson of the May strikes was that notwithstanding the Munitions Act and all the various pieces of repressive legislation that existed, frustrations about dilution, women on lower rates, long hours, and high prices could build up into strike action without prompting on the part of officials. Unless a concerted attempt was made by union officials, shop floor grievances could be channeled in the direction favoured by the Workers' Committee. This lesson was thoroughly learnt by the constituent unions of the CEJC, and they came out of the strikes in a stronger position to deal with the unofficial element than at the beginning. The Workers' Committee had shown it could build on grievances, but as it had not been strong enough to provide leadership, it was unable to control the strike movement.

During the summer of 1917, discussions on a new type of shop steward scheme took place between the different unions in the CEJC, and (to the annoyance of the ASE) between the CEJC and the WU. The final version of

the scheme was accepted by all concerned at the end of September. It recognised stewards elected by all the membership of a particular shop or section, whatever unions were present in that section. Thus an AST steward could represent ASE and other union members as well as his own, and all could vote in his election. It also allowed stewards of unions affiliated to the CEJC to elect Chief Stewards, and form Works Committees. At the same time, the CEJC retained its place as the "Executive Committee over all Shop Stewards and Works Committees" and all stewards had to be endorsed both by their union and by the CEJC and receive an official CEJC Stewards Card. The duties of the steward was to keep the members paid up, attempt to get 100% membership, and together with the Chief Steward, take up shop grievances with management. Disputes not settled in the shop were to be taken up by the Works Committee, and if need be, were to go finally to the CEJC, which alone had the power to call strike action.⁽⁷⁰⁾

This scheme was unique to Coventry, and was possible because of the peculiar conditions which existed in the city, the chief of which was the comparative weakness of craft autonomy, and hence the greater possibility of skilled and semi-skilled workers co-operating. The scheme gave more power to stewards and their committees than individual unions had done in the past, and it also took power over stewards away from the union branch and district committees, and increased the authority of the CEJC.

As far as the Workers' Committee was concerned, the scheme did not go far enough. Dingley eventually wrote a pamphlet contrasting the principles of the CEJC with the principles of the Workers' Committee Movement. The CEJC itself, he claimed, would not succeed as long as it excluded the WU, and as long as it failed to organise on an industrial basis instead of having affiliations from many unions that had a lot of members outside the

engineering industry, such as the National Union of Clerks and the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers. Moreover, the members of the CEJC "were not duly accredited representatives of the workers in the workshop" as they came from District Committees and branch committees; he also criticised the CEJC for refusing to allow shop stewards to sit on it. In contrast, the Workers' Committee Movement sought a revolutionary transformation of society through industrial action, direct representation from the workshop on all union bodies, and all executive decisions to be taken by the members.⁽⁷¹⁾ The militants therefore worked, in competition to the CEJC scheme, but found themselves becoming increasingly isolated. Most shop stewards were not prepared to question the authority of their union's ruling committee, or the CEJC, as long as they did not interfere too much in workshop affairs. The refusal of the Workers' Committee militants to work in the CEJC scheme meant that they had no influence over the struggle for its recognition.

In October the CEJC scheme was presented to the CDEEA, which referred it to the Engineering Employers' Association, the national body. Unions did not wait for official employers' recognition, but began to sign up more shop stewards at a rapid rate; in the three weeks from 25th September to 16th October the ASE gave credentials to 74 stewards, mainly from COW, White and Poppe, and Daimler.⁽⁷²⁾ Stewards themselves began to force the issue of recognition. At the Daimler, there had been stewards in existence for some time, but they did not come out into the open until September when they led a stay-in strike of 700 workers for three days and two nights to secure removal of a foul-mouthed foreman. This was done without union backing, though CEJC officials came in to settle the dispute. As a result, Hodgkinson was elected Chief Convenor of the Works Committee and claimed at

least de facto recognition from management; "I was given carte blanche powers by the management to go into any shop in the works, to use the telephones in the office of the foreman, and if need be to leave the factory at any time to report the state of affairs to the District Secretary of the ASE."⁽⁷³⁾ Even here, however, the management gave no assurance that they would recognise every steward elected by the members.

Thus in the autumn of 1917 the issue of shop stewards recognition was coming to a crisis, and unrest among workers was increased by the shortage of food and by a number of skilled men being called up. There were short stoppages at a number of factories, prompting the Ministry of Munitions man to report "The air is highly charged here, and very little will cause a great blaze". On September 22nd, over 700 men went on strike at White and Poppe, over the victimisation of an AST shop steward. The men soon went back, but when the CEJC met management, they took up eight separate grievances, ranging from deductions from pay for scrap to incompetent management - a good example of the number of different grievances that were building up.⁽⁷⁴⁾ The question of stewards recognition was not taken up by the CEJC, as this was still felt to be a matter for local negotiation.

In October the CDEEA rejected the scheme, and the attitude of the local officials hardened. They still felt that if they did not give a lead, they would lose control to the militants. In order to "prevent the interference of outside bodies" they began to push for recognition firm by firm, with some success.⁽⁷⁵⁾ The Manager of the Singer Works reacted favourably to the scheme, and, according to Givens, "even suggested valuable additions."⁽⁷⁶⁾

However, on 19th November, a dispute over changes in the premium bonus system at White and Poppe produced a strike when the management refused to meet a deputation of stewards. Givens and Orrell, the AST official, were

called in and secured an arrangement whereby management, while still refusing to recognise stewards would agree to meet them disguised as "a deputation of representatives." This was de facto recognition, but it was not enough for the strikers, and the stoppage went on.⁽⁷⁷⁾ The CEJC met on the Wednesday, and again on the Thursday, this time with shop stewards. It was agreed to hold a local conference with the employers on the matter, and 6 officials and 6 stewards were deputed to attend. The CDEEA refused to hold any meeting while the strike continued, and the delegation of 12 met the strikers and persuaded them to return on the evening of Friday 23rd November.⁽⁷⁸⁾ The local conference took place on the Saturday: the employers, pointing out that national negotiations on the question of shop stewards were pending, refused to grant recognition in the interim, but were prepared to accept "spokesmen" not directly involved in the dispute to represent workers.⁽⁷⁹⁾ A meeting of the CEJC and shop stewards in the evening rejected this and by a majority of only seven votes, agreed on strike action.⁽⁸⁰⁾ (The vote was on whether to strike at once or give notice).

The decision had been made primarily by the shop stewards, and was agreed by the full CEJC on Sunday. In reporting to it, Givens urged "If the matter was to be kept in hand, it must be grasped immediately, and not left to drift into irresponsible hands."⁽⁸¹⁾ The prospects of militants running the strike prompted the CEJC to resolve that "Being the Executive body they assumed complete control of the situation, and further that no open air meetings should be held without their sanction."⁽⁸²⁾ Officials remembered that during the May strikes there had been meetings on Pool Meadow with some of the speakers attacking the union leaders.

Many union officials would have been happy with the compromise that was possible, as would many employers. The local Ministry of Munitions

official also hoped for a compromise, and felt that the employers should give way. He was afraid that "the men will eventually get what they want by force majeure" and felt that it would be better

"To meet them halfway by the Department suggesting to the Engineering Employers' Federation, as impartial observers, that it is in their own interests they should, for the duration of the war at least, in controlled establishments, recognise the very mild form of shop committees set up in the Hotchkiss works." (83)

These, he felt, "tend to efficiency rather than otherwise." The official, however noticed the militancy of the men, and sorrowfully reported that even the Hotchkiss Committee was demanding recognition for stewards.

The CDEEA, as the official body of employers, was prepared to make only minor concessions. It drew up a scheme of its own, which was not submitted to the unions, but sent to the EEF. This would have recognised stewards at the rate of about 1 per 100 workers provided they were over thirty years of age, and provided they would agree to spend all their time at work engaged on business of use to the employer. The only function of the steward would be that he would be available for consultation by workers, but under no circumstances would he be allowed to issue orders to fellow workers. Finally the steward would have duties to management; it would be "an equal part of the Shop Steward's duty to foster and maintain amicable relations between the work people and the management, and any shop steward wilfully and persistently attempting to create illfeeling, or restrict earnings or output will not be recognised by the firm as being suitable." (84)

The CDEEA saw shop stewards as a potential threat to management authority on the shop floor. It was prepared to accept a form of consultation, provided decisions of all kinds were left to foremen and chargehands. Employers everywhere felt this, but shopfloor power was of particular importance where piece-work and bonus systems were so widespread; unless management

kept a close hold on the workers, wages would rise.

The strike began on 26th November. Virtually all of the engineering workers in Coventry, some 50,000, came out on strike, including members of the WU, though in theory they were not party to the shop stewards scheme. Members of the National Union of Clerks stopped work as well, and this was unusual enough to produce press comment. One startled correspondent reported that clerks were "lolling about and congested main thoroughfares, mingling with the general body of strikers, and priding themselves upon the growing numerical strength and power of their own trade union."⁽⁸⁵⁾ Despite general hostility, some extremely virulent from the press, and odd stunts such as the leafletting of the city from the air by people who were trying to get a return to work, the strike was peaceful. The CEJC decided not to hold any mass meetings; strikers met at their own union meetings. A fund was set up for women workers on strike, while an aggregate meeting of the ASE recommended to the CEJC "to obtain the use of a Hall to be kept open daily for social and organisation purposes amongst the girls who are out with us, so as to prevent them congregating in the streets."⁽⁸⁶⁾

The local branch of the Discharged and Demobilised Soldiers and Sailors Federation campaigned for an end to the strike, but the workers had a supporter in P.E.T. Widdrington, a vicar, and one of the leaders of the Christian Socialist Movement. Widdrington wrote letters to the press calling for Industrial Democracy and declaring that the existence of shop stewards - "the most important advance the workers have made for many a long day" - was a step in that direction.⁽⁸⁷⁾

CEJC leaders kept up polemics with employers in the local press for

the duration of the strike. The employers claimed that the CEJC scheme had never been accepted by them, and that they had never formally discussed it, though they admitted there had been informal discussions. On the other hand, Spicer of the Brassworkers summed up the union attitude when he wrote that the employers,

"By making a verbal compact to indirectly accept shop stewards pending the Central Conference, and afterwards issuing a circular to employers asking them not to recognise shop stewards, committed a breach of trust, which could be claimed to be the chief reason that caused this stoppage." (88)

Union officials also tried to persuade the press as to the moderate nature of their schemes, and that it was not against any national agreement.

Doherty claimed

"We contend that the recognition of the shop stewards will be in the best interests of employers and working-men in the future. We claim that it will tend to better organisation and better order in the workshops, and absolutely eliminate the spasmodic strike idea which has been so very prevalent in the engineering industry during the last twelve months." (89)

He supported Spicer saying that the employers had agreed to meet workshop representatives "without enquiring too particularly as to whether the men were shop stewards or not. This was regarded by us as an unofficial admission of our principle." He claimed that a circular had been sent by the EEF to all the local employers "insisting that they should not recognise shop stewards in any way," and that this had caused the trouble. (90) This would imply that a national settlement was necessary, but Coventry workers were also aware that only they were on strike. Thus an aggregate meeting of the ASE resolved that "We will resume work only when the matter is settled locally and to our satisfaction". (91)

In the seven days of the strike, there were few incidents. There was

a story that troops were being sent into the Daimler, and the ASE DC passed a resolution threatening force with force, but it turned out that they were a small number of soldiers sent to the Daimler to learn tank work several weeks before the strike began and had not come out with the others.⁽⁹²⁾ At the Humber, the Managing Director and the Works Manager engineered a meeting of the strikers which was addressed by a chaplain who had been flown over from France for the occasion, and got a promise of a return to work. James Reade of the CEJC and George Morris of the WU were able to call another meeting and stop the return before it could take place.⁽⁹³⁾

Notwithstanding the resolutions that this was an issue to be settled locally, the Ministry of Munitions was involved, and talks took place in London. However, it was not until local talks had broken down that serious negotiations began in London on Saturday 1st December. Three delegates from the CEJC with three shop stewards were joined in London by national union officials and others (including Givens) and met local and national employers' leaders. On Saturday, after much discussion, the employers were only able to offer talks on the issue after the men resumed work. This was rejected by the union side. On Sunday the unions proposed that the CEJC Shop Rules should be provisionally accepted by the employers for a period of twelve months, but this in return, was rejected by the employers' representatives. Eventually, an agreement was reached on Sunday evening. The workers were to return on Tuesday 4th December, and a local conference to settle the issue was to be held on the same day. There was to be no victimisation, and the Government, for its part, was to urge an immediate settlement of the issue nationally.⁽⁹⁴⁾

The local union representatives may have left thinking that an immediate national agreement would solve the problem, but no national

meeting was to take place until 14th December, and this was not brought forward as a result of any Government pressure. The union side had agreed to call off the strike without any local commitment to recognition. This may well have been criticised back in Coventry, for the mass meeting of shop stewards on Monday lasted three hours before eventually agreeing to call the strike off. In the afternoon, aggregate meetings of the unions also supported the decision to return. At the ASE aggregate, a motion was put "that we stay out until after Wednesday next, bringing out all the Midlands and thus deliver a knock-out blow," but this was very heavily defeated. (95)

On Tuesday, therefore, the strikers returned to work, and a local conference began. Once again CEJC officials and shop stewards met the CDEEA and discussed the Shop Rules. The employers' notes of the meeting records

"The Unions stated that the Shop Steward's Rules were prepared to enable them to deal with an outside movement which threatened to get out of their control, and pressed the point that their acceptance would prevent accumulation of grievances producing another labour crisis." (96)

Once again, the unions were showing their fear of the unofficial movement, and acknowledging that they had been pushed into action. The employers, however, made it clear that their objections to the Shop Rules were as strong as they had ever been. They particularly attacked rules thirteen and fourteen, which authorised shop stewards, Convenors and Works Committees to take up grievances with foremen and management. "It was pointed out," the employers' minutes record,

"That they meant the tearing up of all existing agreements and the introduction of an entirely new system of dealing with vital matters between Employers and Workmen, including the relegation of foremen to a status practically under the control of the Stewards, and would produce an impossible position." (97)

The minutes concluded on this section that "the view of the parties were too far apart for any possibility of agreement on the subject." This view of the shop Rules was open to question, especially as a couple of days earlier, Givens had been reported in the press as saying the scheme "does not interfere in any shape or form with the York Agreement:" normal procedure would be followed if a dispute could not be dealt with at work, but the aim of the scheme was to see that "matters which can be dealt with in the shop shall be so dealt with, instead of being allowed to be aggravated by long delays."⁽⁹⁸⁾

The employers' attitude had not changed at all as a result of the strike, and although the local conference lasted for several days no agreement was reached. The unions could properly claim to have been duped; they had wanted a local settlement and had called the strike off when they thought a local settlement would be possible. At the conference in London, the local employers had claimed they had "an earnest desire to secure a satisfactory settlement without prejudice to any general settlement which may be arrived at at the Central Conference."⁽⁹⁹⁾ Yet at the local conference the employers had not made any attempt to get a settlement, but had merely put off the issue until it was settled nationally.

Although there had been no local recognition as a result of the strike, with national negotiations pending, the CEJC did not seriously consider resuming the strike action. Thereafter, events passed out of its hands. The agreement that was signed on 20th December by the EEF and most of the engineering unions went well beyond what the CDEEA would have offered, in recognising stewards, giving them the right to take up grievances, leave their work, and take part in negotiations, but it did not satisfy the CEJC. It did not incorporate the idea of one steward representing all the workers

in the shop, nor did it recognise shop committees. The CEJC felt it was inadequate, and continued with a campaign to get their scheme recognised. Once the issue had been refused, they were not able to bring sanctions into play, so although they had some success, most CDEEA members refused to recognise it.

In practice, therefore, the Coventry strike had achieved little for shop stewards in the city, though it hastened a national agreement. In more general terms, however, it represented an important step forward for the labour movement. It was the first time in the history of engineering in the city that there had been a general strike against Coventry employers. All the workers were brought together in a common struggle to try to impose a new kind of organisation on management. It was a testing time for the still young trade union movement in the city, and although everything was not won, unions gained in confidence as a result of the dispute. The CEJC consolidated its position at the head of the movement in the city, for it alone had run the strike, despite the fact that the CEJC scheme was not recognised. The Workers Committee militants remained isolated after the strike, while the NAC of the movement made no intervention in the dispute.

CEJC leadership did not mean complete unity in the labour movement. The WU had been solid in the strike, despite the fact that it was not represented in the negotiations. But when, a few weeks later, it again applied to join the CEJC it was again rejected on the grounds that it had no right to keep its skilled members. Moreover, there were tensions within the CEJC itself, which emerged in the Embargo strike in July 1918. In fact, the strike for recognition was the point at which the labour movement in the city was most united. Later in the war, dissensions and fear of the military call-up exposed the divisions in the movement.

V The Embargo Strike

In January 1918 the Government decided it would withdraw the Schedule of Reserved Occupations, and make skilled engineers available for military service, and a Bill was introduced into Parliament for this purpose. Skilled engineering unions led the agitation against this, and the left wing in the unions found themselves in a difficult position; they did not wish to contribute to a sectional struggle which sought to protect some men while others were allowed to be called up, but rather wished to conduct a broader campaign against the war itself. However, there was little likelihood of this developing quickly in the short term.

At the same time a further round of dilution was begun, and again the skilled unions led the protest. The first couple of months in 1918 saw a temporary falling off of orders in some workshops, and for the first time for some years men were unemployed. The CEJC called for a ban on overtime, and opposed further attempts at dilution.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ An aggregate meeting of ASE members passed a motion stating

"That we refuse to submit to any alteration in the present basis of Exemption from Military Service to those employed in the engineering Trades, prior to the Government going into conference with the Central powers with a view to bringing about a cessation of hostilities....."

To rub the point in, a second motion stated

"That the cessation of war is now possible and urgently necessary and the members present are prepared to assist in any general movement to attain that end." ⁽¹⁰¹⁾

At the end of January, there was much talk of a general strike in the city against the dilution proposals and the Military Service Bill,⁽¹⁰²⁾ and given the attitude of the ASE members this could have become a strike for a negotiated peace. The ASE District Committee appear to have wanted a strike, but the WU made it clear that this time it would not join in, and

ballots in the workshop showed that most skilled workers were not prepared to stop. The ASE and some of the other unions felt that the CEJC had not done enough to oppose the new dilution attempts, and there was a big row on the CEJC. As a result, the four most important skilled unions, the ASE, AST, UMW and SEMS while agreeing to remain in the CEJC, decided to organise regular meetings of their District Committees separately.

The ASE District Committee sent two delegates to the unofficial union conference which met at Manchester to consider strike action, but the March offensive by the Germans changed people's attitudes to the war. An aggregate ASE meeting a couple of days after the German offensive had begun accepted the wishes of the Chairman when he asked that "No personal views should be expressed either for War or Peace; that the meeting should keep itself to the business in hand and deal with the same with a view to the interests of the whole Society," a very different position from that of the January meeting.⁽¹⁰³⁾

The new climate of opinion made it possible for employers to attack militants in the factories. At the Hotchkiss, a number of workers, including Dingley, were sacked, and protest strikes only led to more sackings. Most of the workers refused to support the strikes, and the local union leadership refused to help. Givens and Orrell attended a shop meeting, stressing they were there in an unofficial capacity, and urging "that a broad view should be taken by the members and no hasty decisions arrived at." They proposed that the men ought to look for alternative work, and were backed up by the CEJC which called off the strike and arranged a local meeting with the Ministry of Munitions officials to find other work.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ Needless to say, Dingley was not offered other work, and he had to leave the city and take a job in a Birmingham factory under

a false name.

The ASE, unable to get local concerted action, carried on a sectional campaign that angered many other trade unionists in the city. Givens, who had been in the post for only a few months, resigned as CEJC Chairman because he felt the ban on overtime was not being firmly operated. At the end of March, the District Committee resurrected its policy of regular monthly meetings of its own stewards, even though CEJC stewards' meetings were still carrying on. At their meetings, ASE stewards agreed to try to protect themselves from military service by supplying lists of names of dilutees to Givens, who in turn sent them to the Recruiting Officers in the city.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ The District Committee also called on the Government to set up a new recruiting tribunal in Coventry to review the existing exemptions, to be composed equally of skilled workers and employers; everyone who had entered the industry after August 1914 ought to be classed as a dilutee and made available for military service. In a period of four months, leaders of the ASE had gone from a position of opposing the war to volunteering to act as recruitment officers, provided that it was the semi-skilled and unskilled that were recruited. Their new sectional approach meant co-operation with anyone, employer or government official, to see that other union members were sent to the front instead of them. In turn it produced a reaction from other CEJC unions and from the WU. Militant trade union action suffered, and when a serious dispute did arise, it split the union movement in the city.

The Embargo dispute began over a letter that was distributed to foremen in a number of large munitions factories on July 1st, and which rapidly fell into the hands of, amongst others, the ASE District Committee. The letter said that "In accordance with instructions received from the Ministry

of Munitions, we are prohibited from engaging skilled men of any type." This meant "any man in receipt of at least the Standard District Rates," although in theory, every worker doing a skilled man's job should have been getting the skilled rates, even if they were themselves dilutees. The letter urged foremen to make every effort "whenever it is necessary to employ men, to make use of semi-or unskilled men only."⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ The ASE had a copy of the letter sent by the Hotchkiss management, and the Ministry of Munitions later claimed that the letter put the views of the Management and not the official situation. The Hotchkiss letter had got the definition of a skilled man wrong, but it did not otherwise misrepresent the Government's position which amounted to a new attempt to shake out skilled men without any consultation with the unions. The letter immediately caused confusion among employers and workers alike. Men who had left other jobs to work at the four factories concerned - the Hotchkiss, Daimler, Siddeley-Deasy and Triumph Cycle - found management there did not know whether to take them on or not, and a number were turned away.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾

A hurriedly called meeting of the ASE Midlands Divisional Conference resolved "that in any rationing of skilled labour that may be necessary, the trade unions concerned shall be the only authority we will accept."⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ The CEJC demanded a meeting with the responsible Ministry officials within 48 hours; these were produced, but were found to be unconvincing, speaking "in a very halting and uncertain manner" and the CEJC resolved

"That if the embargo is not removed by noon on Monday July 15th the workmen concerned will hand in a week's notice to cease work until Freedom of action for skilled workers in obtaining employment is restored." ⁽¹⁰⁹⁾

On Sunday 14th July this motion was put to a crowded aggregate meeting, and accepted, though some wanted an immediate strike.

Notices were duly given, and in the week that followed, preparations were made. The ASE District Committee recommended "that no pressure be put on unskilled men or women for support."⁽¹¹⁰⁾ - a superfluous comment as the WU had already made it clear that its members would not be striking. An ASE aggregate meeting resolved "any settlement arrived at must be first accepted by a full meeting of District Committee and submitted to aggregate meetings for approval."⁽¹¹¹⁾ However, the week's notice made it possible for national union leaders and Government spokesmen to condemn the action, and in the case of the latter, threaten to conscript strikers.

On the day before the strike was due to begin, further meetings took place. After discussion, the CEJC decided that if the Ministry of Munitions official that they had met, a Mr. Langton, could get the Ministry to agree to the holding of a National conference to consider the whole question of the utilisation of skilled labour, they would be prepared to call off the threatened strike. This greatly alarmed the ASE District Committee which on the same day declared that "This D.C. insist that our representatives on the J.C. must uphold at all costs the removal of the Embargo pending a Conference convened nationally."⁽¹¹²⁾ In the evening, a reply was received from Langton, which only offered a conference on the utilisation of skilled labour "apart from the Embargo", and went on to state firmly "the Government's considered policy in the matter of the Embargo scheme cannot be a matter for discussion,... the Ministry cannot carry on the supply of Munitions to the Troops without the Embargo."⁽¹¹³⁾

This letter upset many on the CEJC who wanted to call off the strike. Reports from other areas showed that with the exception of Birmingham, there would be no strikes, and that Midlanders would be going it alone.

On the day the strike was due to start, 22nd July, a meeting of the CEJC with representatives from Branch Committees, District Committees, and Works Committees rejected the letter from Langton, but voted by 87 votes to 24 to recommend to aggregate meetings that strike notices be suspended until a national conference of trade unions could be called "in order that all skilled workmen shall cease work upon a given date."⁽¹¹⁴⁾ This created a split amongst the unions, for the minority refused to accept what they saw as a betrayal, and stopped work from the original time set for the strike which was 5 pm. that evening. The meeting itself was the subject of much bitterness. It was unusual for the CEJC to call a meeting of such a kind, and representation was uneven. The ASE District Committee sent along only three delegates, but some of the smaller unions had sent more. Givens claimed bitterly that it was "a decision contrary to the wishes of the members, and which decision was given by an enormously disproportionate representation of small societies, and was proposed by a Society not then affiliated."⁽¹¹⁵⁾ Read, the CEJC secretary, claimed that unions could have called for a card vote if they had wanted, but that they had not. Nevertheless, it is clear by the size of the votes that it was the whole meeting and not just the CEJC, where each union had only one vote, that had taken the decision. As a result the minority of unions that had the largest membership in the CEJC found themselves at odds with the rest. In the week the strike lasted, the two sides of the CEJC used the local press for the purpose of abusing each other.

On Tuesday 23rd July, the AST held an aggregate meeting in the morning and resolved to stay out on strike. After a heated meeting, an aggregate meeting of the ASE, in the afternoon decided by a large majority to do the same. On Wednesday, the UMWA and SEM also decided to stay out. The four

major craft unions were thus acting together. Their combined membership was over 10,000 but most reports put the total number of strikers at upwards of 16,000, so they must have been joined by some who disregarded the appeals of Read and other leaders of the CEJC. These tried to defeat the strike by posting notices in all the workplaces urging the men to remain in, by organising a local strike ballot, and an unofficial national engineering conference for Thursday 25th July. But by that date the strikers in Coventry had been joined by some 15,000 in Birmingham.⁽¹¹⁶⁾

Nevertheless, the leaders of those who were not on strike played an important part in reaching a settlement. The CEJC was partially responsible for the conference of Joint Committees which took place at Leeds, and which threatened strike action from 30th July. This threat, on top of the existing strikes, caused a change of heart on the part of the Government. Lloyd George promised the establishment of a Committee of Enquiry containing representatives of the four unions involved, and at the same time declared that anyone on strike on Monday 29th July could have their protection certificate withdrawn. This was enough to end the strike. While about 10,000 met on Monday morning to vote to return, thousands more were already back at work.

Although it had only lasted a week, the strike had produced a violent wave of hostility. Newspapers exaggerated the role of left-wingers, particularly the Daily Mail ("Every compartment of the men's lavatories was found inscribed with the legend 'Strike to stop the War,'" it recorded about one local factory).⁽¹¹⁷⁾ Posters were issued by the Ministry of Munitions stating that the strike was "An attempt to overthrow the policy of the State in a time of national danger." Havelock Wilson leader of the National Union of Seamen, turned up in Coventry with several hundred

seamen, and marched them round, demanding a food embargo on the city - a call unlikely to win local support!⁽¹¹⁸⁾ The recently appointed Industrial Vicar in the city began his crusade against Bolshevism, still a relatively new word. But it was the Government's threat which precipitated a return.

The issue of the Embargo note was soon forgotten. In practical terms, it had little effect on skilled workers, and the preliminary report of the Committee of Enquiry, which did not come out until a month before the end of the war, was quietly received. The dispute had a longer effect on the labour movement in Coventry. The CEJC did not perish in the split that had occurred, but it lost a lot of its authority. Henceforth, local district committees returned to separate organisation, and the Joint Committee was relegated to the role of a co-ordinating body for the comparatively small number of issues when joint action was felt appropriate. The unique Coventry experiment had failed, and so much of the steam ran out of attempts to get recognition for the CEJC shop rules.

For about three months after the Embargo strike it seemed that the CEJC would collapse altogether, for some of the unions that had been out were refusing to send delegates, and the ASE delegates resigned from the Committee after a censure motion on Read had been defeated by one vote.⁽¹¹⁹⁾ However, in October Read resigned, and shortly afterwards new delegates were appointed by the ASE. The skilled unions agreed to push for changes in the method of voting on the Committee, and agreed to meet separately, if required, so their commitment was not total. In November 1918, it was reported that the AST were electing their own shop stewards in the workshops. This provoked a reaction from the ASE District Committee "as we are still of opinion that the J.C. rules are the only rules under which an

efficient movement can be maintained,"⁽¹²⁰⁾ and it is possible that the habit of shops electing stewards without worrying what card they held continued in many places. Finally, at the end of December 1918, the ASE celebrated the festive season by suggesting to the CEJC that an arrangement be reached with the WU to get them into the Committee. Had such an arrangement been made at the beginning of the war the history of the CEJC might well have been very different, and the general struggles of workers in the war years would have been more effective.

VI The General Election

The growth of class consciousness among working people found a political outlet in the General Election of December 1918. The election was called in a hurry, after several years of inactivity on the part of the major political parties. For the first time, a Labour candidate stood, but Wallhead was opposed by Bannington, who stood with the backing of the local branch of the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers (NFDDSS). As the sitting M.P. had been disowned by the Liberals, who were putting up another candidate, there were five contesting the election.

As a supporter of the war, Bannington had joined up in 1916. He had risen to the rank of sergeant by 1918 before being invalided home suffering from shell shock. He soon recovered, and took over leadership of the NFDDSS in Coventry, which had been established in 1917 and had attempted to intervene in the strikes in the city to get a return to work. The Federation was an unusual body, being fiercely patriotic, with red, white and blue election colours, and very anti-German, but it also claimed to be a

revolutionary socialist body that would not accept ex-officers into its ranks. For a few years after the war it had a substantial following among ex-servicemen. Bannington made it clear that he was standing because of Wallhead's opposition to the war, and although he issued a socialist programme, the issue was in reality one of whether he would succeed in splitting the labour movement over the war issue. Here Bannington was hindered by his BSP past. Supporters of Wallhead delighted in remembering the pre-war days when Bannington addressed open-air meetings denouncing the armed forces, urging his audience not to become "hired assassins at a shilling a day" and distributing anti-militarist literature.⁽¹²¹⁾

Only Poole, who had already severed his connections with the ILP, of the city's labour leaders, came out in support for Bannington. Other pro-war leaders such as Wale, kept in the background and remained loyal to the Labour Party. T.J.Harris, the Labour Party Chairman, admitted the existence of a "serious cleavage of opinion that has existed in its (i.e. the Labour Party's) ranks regarding the conduct of the war," but he was able to show that the vast majority of the leadership in the city rallied to Wallhead.⁽¹²²⁾ This did not mean that the split did not provoke bitterness; in fact Bannington and Wallhead attacked each other so much that they had little ammunition left to shoot off at the other three candidates. Accusations and counter-accusations were made, and many came to accept the charge that Bannington's candidature was "a plot hatched at the head office of a large industrial firm in the city."⁽¹²³⁾

In the event, the election was comfortably won by the Conservatives. The new M.P. was Chairman of the Daimler Company. The votes cast were

Sir E. Manville (Con)	17,380
R.C. Wallhead (Lab)	10,298
Sir C. Mansell (Lib)	4,128
A.C.Bannington (NFDDSS)	3,806
D.M. Mason (Ind.Lib)	3,145

Even with Bannington's vote added to his, Wallhead would have lost, but he had secured enough to encourage the Labour Party and discourage Bannington and his supporters. It was the first election in the city under manhood suffrage, and while it is clear that many engineering workers had voted against Labour, the Liberals had done very badly and Labour had emerged as the main opposition. Givens was able to comment "We have driven the capitalist parties all into one camp, and for the future, however many side-issues are introduced, it will be simply a fight between Capitalism and Labour."⁽¹²⁴⁾ In fact Givens was running ahead of himself in purely electoral terms - the Liberals and Conservatives continued to compete with each other, and Labour was able to benefit from this in 1923. His statement is valid, however, as a general comment on political and industrial developments in the war years.

VII The war years had witnessed a rapid growth in the power of the unions, which for the first time since the mid-nineteenth century were again able to exercise great influence in Coventry. Thanks to the growth of the shop steward movement, there was a qualitative change in the unions as well as a quantitative. Shop stewards ignored the exclusive side of the unions, and aimed at collective action for all groups. Instead of the union being a slightly remote body that operated for the most part outside the factory, it had become more substantial, and an accepted extension of the worker's own work-activity. The shop stewards' movement made it more easy for individual workers to contribute positively to the union, and so learn the value of collective activity. Moreover, the skeletons of the trade union organisations were given flesh by the addition of hundreds of active trade unionists.

to the collective leadership of the labour movement. The shop stewards movement therefore constituted an important and lasting addition to the unions in the city.

However, while the war saw the extension of the power of the working class in Coventry, this new power was not matched by strengthened organisation. As the unions grew, the Trades Council lost its place as the leading forum of the trade union and labour movement. The CEJC, as a purely industrial body was able to provide leadership of a sort, but by the end of the war, that too could not claim to express the views of the workers of the city, but merely served to bring together the district committees only when those committees wished it to. The CEJC had also failed in its attempt to unite shop stewards behind a general union leadership, while the Workers' Committee had failed to unite shop stewards into a separate movement of themselves. Authority was fragmented between branches, shop committees and district committees, with no organisation capable of guaranteeing a united front in any struggle that was to come. In the political field, the Labour Party was the accepted party to vote for, but had been virtually inactive for four years. The co-ops and the tenants associations were witnesses of important extensions of class organisation outside the factories, but lacked importance because they were removed from industrial struggle.

The weakness of the craft tradition, compared to other engineering centres, and the fact of thousands of semi- and unskilled workers in unions prevented the growth of an autonomous movement led by revolutionaries - a feature of other centres. Instead trade union officials were able to retain leadership of the stewards by modifying the principle of exclusiveness. In war-time conditions, however, when national agreements clearly discriminated between skilled and unskilled, the craft tradition was strong enough to ensure that the CEJC experiment did not succeed. The general unionism that had appeared was too new and weak to challenge effectively the craft unions.

The craft unions themselves had taken in semi-skilled workers, and had allowed skilled to do semi-skilled work. Developments in the war years had accelerated the move away from skill in engineering, and this was gradually cutting the ground from under the main engineering unions. Craft unionism, general unionism, and revolutionary syndicalism had competed in the war years, but although the craft principles predominated, none of these movements had fully stamped their identity on the Coventry trade unions.

Trade unionism was still a new experience for most workers, and the unions had not had to face a prolonged dispute without the knowledge that the Government would intervene in some way. Given a division between craft and general unionism there was doubt as to whether the unions could maintain unity in any major dispute.

FOOTNOTES

1. Medical Officer of Health, Annual Reports 1914-1918.
2. Armstrong-Siddeley Motors, The Evening and the Morning.
3. Tripp, op.cit. p.103.
4. Coventry Co-op, op.cit. p.282.
5. Yates, op.cit. pp.55/56.
6. Hodgkinson, op.cit. pp.35/36.
7. Coventry Socialist and Labour Movement, Reminiscences. An unpublished collection of Recollection, kept in the Coventry and Warwickshire Collection, produced in 1949.
8. Coventry Labour Party, Annual Report, 1914.
9. Coventry Labour Party, Annual Report, 1916.
10. ibid.
11. Yates, op.cit. pp.58/60.
12. M.D.T. 15th April 1915; "We cannot devote space to extremely long letters apparently written with the object of discouraging recruiting and all forms of patriotic effort, and endeavouring to stir up ill feeling among classes of Englishmen." Two days earlier it reported that its own patriotic duty prevented it from covering strikes.
13. M.D.T. 14th May 1917.
14. See, for example, M.D.T. 11th October 1918.
15. ASE District Committee Minutes.
16. M.D.T. 13th November 1916.
17. M.D.T. 12th October 1918.
18. M.D.T. 9th October 1916.
19. Mun 5/49. Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest, July 1917, Report, of Number 4 Division, West Midlands.
20. M.D.T. 28th November 1916.
21. M.D.T. 17th February 1917.
22. Mun 5/49, op.cit.

23. Coventry Co-op, op.cit. p.281 onwards.
24. Coventry Co-operative Society (CCS), Management Board Minutes, 9th August 1918.
25. Annual Health Report, 1919.
26. Annual Health Reports, 1915 to 1919.
27. Annual Health Reports, 1916 to 1919.
28. Annual Health Report, 1919.
29. Annual Health Report, 1920.
30. Annual Health Report, 1919.
31. Coventry Graphic, 16th November 1917.
32. Hodgkinson, op.cit. p.33.
33. Quoted in Coventry Standard, 22/23rd January 1915.
34. Coventry Housing Committee, Minutes, 14th October 1915.
35. ibid.
36. Housing Committee Minutes, 9th November 1915; first estimates put the cost of the scheme at 24% above pre-war prices, and the Tenants' Association assumed that the Ministry paid for this figure: M.D.T. 3rd May 1917.
37. M.D.T. 8th May 1917.
38. M.D.T. 27th September 1917.
39. M.D.T. 3rd May 1917. 416 tenants voted in favour, 55 against, 54 did not vote, and there were 4 spoilt papers. This totals 529, which suggests that only the "head" of the household, presumably male, were asked to vote.
40. Housing Committee Minutes, 22nd May 1917.
41. ibid.
42. M.D.T. 14th May 1917.
43. M.D.T. 24th May 1917.
44. Housing Committee Minutes, 18th December 1917.
45. Coventry Trades Council, Annual Report, 1919.
46. It may well have been higher in 1918.

47. ASE Monthly Journal, October 1915.
48. ASE District Committee Minutes, 11th April 1916 and 7th March 1917.
49. " " " " 18th November 1916.
50. " " " " 4th January 1917.
51. J. Hinton The First Shop Stewards' Movement, (London) 1973.
52. Dingley had been secretary of the local branch of the Industrial Workers of the World. He became a shop steward at the Hotchkiss Works until he was sacked in March 1918. He worked for a time at Longbridge, until sacked for leading a strike there. He worked as a national organiser for the Shop Stewards' Movement for a time in 1918 and 1919. He later went to work with Wal Hannington at the Slough Motor Depot, where he became Works Convenor and led a stay-in strike. He joined the Communist Party, and led the Unemployed movement in Coventry in the early 1920s, and with Wal Hannington, led the national unemployed marches. He served a couple of short terms in prison in the 1920s, and was effectively barred from a job for the whole of the inter-war period.
53. The Times, 3rd August 1918.
54. Dingley, The Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement, (Coventry) 1918.
55. ASE District Committee Minutes, 20th February 1917.
56. Hodgkinson in an interview.
57. ASE District Committee Minutes, 11th April 1917.
58. ibid.
59. ibid.
60. Mun 2/28 14th April 1917.
61. Mun 2/28 24th November 1917.
62. ASE District Committee Minutes, 29th April 1917.
63. " " " " 6th May 1917.
64. " " " " 14th May 1917.
65. Mun 2/28 12th May 1917.
66. ASE District Committee Minutes, 13th and 14th March 1917.
67. ASE District Committee Minutes, 15th May 1917.
68. Cassidy was a shop steward at the Coventry Ordnance Works. He was a member of the ASE District Committee at this time. It appears that he left the city after the war.

69. ASE District Committee Minutes, 18th May 1917.
70. G.D.H. Cole, op.cit. pp.131-141.
71. Dingley, op.cit. p.12.
72. ASE District Committee Minutes, 25th September, 2nd October, 9th October and 16th October 1917.
73. Hodgkinson, op.cit. p.43.
74. ASE District Committee Minutes, 25th September 1917.
75. ASE District Committee Minutes, 16th October 1917.
76. ASE District Committee Minutes, 25th October 1917.
77. ASE District Committee Minutes, 20th November 1917.
78. ASE District Committee Minutes, 25th November 1917.
79. ibid.
80. ibid.
81. ibid.
82. ibid.
83. Mun. 23/28, 24th November 1917.
84. CDEEA papers. Suggestions attached to a letter from the EEF to C. Martin, Secretary, 21st December 1917.
85. Evening Dispatch, 30th November 1917.
86. ASE District Committee Minutes, 29th November 1917.
87. M.D.T., 4th December 1917.
88. M.D.T., 8th December 1917.
89. Birmingham Gazette, 30th November 1917.
90. ibid.
91. ASE District Committee Minutes, 29th November 1917.
92. ASE District Committee Minutes, 30th November 1917.
93. M.D.T., 3rd December 1917.
94. Cab. Pro. 24/GT2840, 2nd December 1917.
95. ASE District Committee Minutes, 3rd December 1917. The majority was about 5 to 1.

96. CDEEA, Local Conference Notes, 4th and 5th December 1917.
97. ibid.
98. Evening Dispatch, 30th November 1917.
99. Cab. Pro. 24/GT2840, 1st December 1917.
100. ASE District Committee Minutes, 2nd January 1918.
101. ASE District Committee Minutes, 6th January 1918.
102. Mun. 5/80, Report on Existing, Imminent and Threatened Strikes, 29th January 1918.
103. ASE District Committee Minutes, 24th March 1918.
104. ASE District Committee Minutes, 23rd March 1918.
105. ASE District Committee Minutes, 9th April and 23rd April 1918.
106. ASE District Committee Minutes, 5th July 1918.
107. Committee of Enquiry on Labour Embargoes, Interim Report, by Mr. Justice McCardies.
108. ASE District Committee Minutes, 9th July 1918.
109. ASE District Committee Minutes, 12th July, 1918.
110. ASE District Committee Minutes, 16th July 1918.
111. ASE District Committee Minutes, 17th July 1918.
112. ASE District Committee Minutes, 21st July 1918.
113. ibid.
114. ASE District Committee Minutes, 22nd July 1918. Also Mun. 5/51, Reaction to Embargo Scheme, July 1918, 22nd July 1918.
115. ASE District Committee Minutes, 22nd September 1918.
116. M.D.T., 24th July 1918, and Mun. 5/51, 25th July 1918.
117. Daily Mail, 24th July 1918.
118. M.D.T., 29th July 1918.
119. ASE District Committee Minutes, 20th August 1918.
120. ASE District Committee Minutes, 26th November 1918.

- 121. M.D.T., 6th December 1918.
- 122. ibid.
- 123. ibid.
- 124. M.D.T., 30th December 1918.

CHAPTER THREE

Post war Political Struggles

I Unemployed Struggles

The slump in the British economy particularly affected those companies that had recently revalued their capital, and which produced for the luxury market. Many of Coventry's firms did both, so for a time in 1920/1921 unemployment was higher in the city than virtually anywhere else. Both unemployment and the big industrial struggles were seized upon by the new Communist Party, which at least for a few years, convinced itself that a working class seizure of power was possible. This chapter deals with the way the CP thrust itself into the limelight for a few years, and tried to become a major opponent to the Labour Party. It also covers the deterioration of the ILP and the emergence of a professional Labour Party. The first part covers the battles that took place over the issue of unemployment, the second the growth of the CP and relations with others in the labour movement.

From mid 1920 to mid 1921, unemployment in Coventry grew from 1,535 to 12,534. This meant that over one quarter of engineering workers were out of work, with many more suffering cuts in living standards through short time working. In November 1920, just as unemployment in Coventry had begun to rise steeply, the new Unemployment Insurance Act came into effect, designed to extend the state unemployment scheme. The Act was conceived before the era of mass unemployment, and failed to cope with the long term unemployed, or with those who had not been in work long enough to qualify for benefit. Many workers, particularly while waiting for their benefit period to be extended, were forced back onto the poor law.⁽¹⁾

Poor law relief dated from the Middle Ages, but by the 1920s was aimed

at vagrants, destitutes and the old and the infirm. Yet in June 1922 there were over 1 million insured people claiming relief. Relief was administered by Boards of Poor Law Guardians, who were elected alongside local councillors. Although the Government had laid down regulations dealing with various classes of people, there was scope for local Guardians to interpret the regulations in a generous or penny-pinching manner. Thus at one time in 1922 a couple with two children on relief in Poplar, a Labour borough, could get 44/6d plus rent and fuel payments, while a similar couple in Stoke would be able to get a maximum of 25/-.⁽²⁾

Most of Coventry was covered by the Coventry Union Board of Guardians, but there also existed a Foleshill Union which covered the Rural District of Foleshill, stretching round the east and north outskirts of the city and including Bedworth, Binley, Exhall, Foleshill, Keresley, Stoke and Willenhall. In Foleshill, the local rural councillors doubled up as Guardians, but in Coventry there was a division of posts and the Guardians were elected separately. The political composition of both Boards was similar. In 1919 some Labour Guardians were elected, but were in a minority in both Unions. Foleshill Rural District covered farming and well-off suburban areas, and representatives from these were in the majority while the minority came from Stoke Heath which had been dependent on the Ordnance Works during the war and which was heavily hit by unemployment after the war when the factory closed. Stoke Heath was the only part of the District with Labour Guardian representatives to the Board, though the tenants on the estate were not united, as four candidates stood for two seats in the November 1920 elections. All of the candidates were from the labour movement, though party labels were not used.⁽³⁾ Al~~so~~ Read, leader of the rent strike, was elected along with Mrs. Emily Smith, who became a long serving

Labour Councillor in the 1930s in Coventry. One of the other candidates, Ben Fowler, became one of the leaders of the Stoke Heath Unemployed Committee, which appeared to have a leadership to the left of the labour representatives on the Council and the Board.

The functions of the Boards were to draw up scales of relief, to determine the conditions that were to be attached to relief, and to supervise the administration which was carried out by Relieving Officers. It was the Relieving Officers who were the main targets of the unemployed movements.

The first and most important organisation of unemployed workers in the City was the Coventry Unemployed Workers Committee, set up in September 1920. Its first event was when it lead a group of two thousand workers to the Armstrong-Siddeley works at Parkside where the unemployed went into the firm's precinct and a meeting was held of workers and workless. The meeting was addressed by Tom Dingley, erstwhile organiser of the Workers' Committee Movement, Harry Emery who was to be the leader of the local unemployed for several years, and James Stewart, the recently appointed Midlands Organiser of the Communist Party.⁽⁴⁾ All three were (or were shortly to become) members of the Communist Party, which had succeeded in taking a leading role in the unemployed movement right from the start. The Party's use of full time officials to address such meetings was soon stopped in favour of a lower profile, but initially the Unemployed Committee was regarded as a great success for the newly formed local party branch.

The week before the Committee was set up, The Communist, the weekly organ of the CP, reported large meetings in the city and staged that "Coventry will be strong for Communism soon. A good working branch is in being and will be heard of later on."⁽⁵⁾ Readers did not have to wait long. The

report from Coventry in the next issue was headed "The Coventry Unemployed, A Soviet Formed" and informed the world that "Comrade Emery had been elected secretary of the local Soviet."⁽⁶⁾ This enthusiastic description showed how the CP could be carried away by contact with a mass movement.

Some weeks later, The Communist published a statement from the Unemployed Workers Committee headed "To the Working Class" which explained itself and its organisation:

"The Committee was elected at a mass meeting of unemployed workers, attended by about 1,200 persons. It is important to notice that each member of the Committee is a delegate subject to immediate recall... All decisions as to activities, and all resolutions either emanate from the mass meetings - which most frequently is the case - or are submitted by the Committee to the mass meetings... The Committee is determined not to lead the Workers into side issues, but insist upon the overthrow of capitalism as the only solution for unemployment and all the grievances of the workers which arise from their status as wage slaves..."
(7)

The Committee had nine elected members and three co-opted from the local branch of the National Union of Ex-Servicemen. Although only a minority of the Committee initially appear to have been Communists, men like Dingley, Jackson, Preece and Emery, all Communists, acted as leaders whether on the Committee or not. As the above statement shows, the Committee was very much influenced by the experience of the Soviets, and the theories of the Workers Committee in Coventry, with men like Dingley and Jackson directly linking the two.

This was a major coup for the small branch of the Communist Party, and it tried to make the most of it with frequent open air meetings as well as use of the Baths Assembly Hall. Local factories were visited and workers used to resist overtime. Town meetings were held, and there were demonstrations at the Board of Guardians. Town meetings were relics of

feudal Coventry rediscovered by the Communists who could force the Mayor to call a meeting if they could collect 200 signatures. One was held on October 4th 1920 and the Mayor had to preside while virtually every active members of the Communist Party in the area spoke to various resolutions. Dingley proposed the establishment of a Workers Council, while the main resolution called for the unemployed to take over disused factories to be run under workers' control to produce goods ordered by a Russian Trade Delegation that was to be invited to visit the city. The motion was not lacking in ingenuity, but nothing came of it, the Mayor simply saying he would pass it on to the proper authorities, whoever they were!⁽⁸⁾ A year later another Town Meeting set up a Coventry Russian Famine Relief Committee. It was good propaganda, but provided nothing material for the unemployed.

In August 1921 a meeting of unemployed AEU members established a union Unemployed Committee, with DC acceptance. The new body was not the work of the Communists, who viewed with alarm the prospect of several different unemployed movements. At the same time the Rev. J.J. Armitage, who had the responsibility of being the Church's Messenger to the workers, which he interpreted as leading the fight against Bolshevism, had formed his own unemployed movement. The AEU Unemployed Committee kept clear of this, and held separate demonstrations, but also initially kept clear of the CUWC, and called instead for a new Executive Committee for the unemployed, made up of representatives from unemployed committees from different unions. Their demonstrations took place without support from the CUWC, which prompted the editorial of the Midland Daily Telegraph to point out that on demonstrations "There was none of that unpleasantness of tone which was rather marked in Coventry about twelve months ago."⁽⁹⁾

This pleasant state of affairs was merely an interlude; in the spring of 1921 several of the leaders of the CUWC, including Emery, Dingley and Len Jackson had been arrested for making seditious speeches in various parts of the Midlands, and this took some of the steam out of the Committee, though the Stoke Heath Unemployed Committee continued to be active. Armitage's organisation soon disappeared, and with the CUWC becoming more active again, relations between this body and the AEU body grew more cordial. As the prospect for all out struggle with the Employers' Association grew, the unemployed began to discuss what role they could play. The District Committee became so alarmed at the activity of its own Unemployed Committee that it called its leaders to a meeting to raise its complaints.

Delegates from the AEU committee made it clear that some of them at least also belonged to the CUWC, the "Red Card Organisation." One pointed out that a delegate Conference called by the body and attended by representatives from six unions had already drawn up plans for the lockout and the Union Committee were going to support them. Alex Maddison, who was active on both bodies said "that even if it came to split heads, they were going to have Unity." He told the DC that they intended to co-operate with the CUWC, whether the union approved or not. As Chapter Four shows, the DC was most reluctant to accept this, but eventually gave way.⁽¹⁰⁾

There was thus the basis for a united movement, but this was weakened less than a month later during the lock-out by the decision of the CUWC to put up its own candidates in the elections for the Boards of Guardians. This meant splitting the Labour vote, and naturally provoked a strong reaction from the Labour Party.

Normally the Guardians' elections were quiet affairs, but the inter-

vention of the CUWC coming after many months of political protests that frequently centred on the Guardians guaranteed a lively election. J.T. Tyson, the secretary of the Labour Party, wrote to the Midland Daily Telegraph denouncing all the CUWC candidates as Communists and saying that their aim was "To render the Poor Law unworkable", as their demands could not reasonably be met.⁽¹¹⁾ In fact, the Unemployed Committee wanted work or maintenance at union rates, and a scale of Poor Relief based on the payment of 36/- to a couple plus rent, coal and gas.⁽¹²⁾

In reply one of the candidates of the Unemployed Committee pointed out that they had been elected by mass meetings, with "No creed or party being considered to qualify for nomination." Len Jackson from the Communist Party wrote to claim that only two of the nine CUWC candidates were communists and denying that they had any plans to smash the Poor Law as they saw unemployment relief as a national problem. He attacked the Labour Party for being too much concerned with the impact of relief on the rates, and also raised the question of who should be the candidate for the labour movement in the next General Election. He claimed that the Communist Party had been the first to put a candidate in the field, but that the Labour Party had made no attempt to get unity. He said he was prepared to let the workers of Coventry choose between Jack Leckie (Communist) and Bob Williams (Labour) either through a public debate followed by a vote or through a ballot of union members, and complained that "It has been left to the Communist Party on every occasion to advance the views of maintaining a united front."⁽¹³⁾ Tyson replied by concentrating on the clash over the Parliamentary candidates, and tried to dismiss as unimportant "The motley coterie locally designated the Coventry branch of the C.P.G.B."⁽¹⁴⁾

In the Board elections that followed, the Conservatives, Liberals and

Independents strengthened their hold on the Board at the expense of Labour, which gained one seat and lost three, and saw its representation shrink to four out of fifteen. The CUWC candidates did poorly; all of them came bottom of the poll and the only respectable results were at Swanswell, where Alex Maddison polled 257 votes, about 10% of the votes cast, and at Stoke, where Tom Dingley polled 497 which was less than 10%. The total of the highest Labour votes in each ward (there were several seats in each ward), gave a figure of 5,800; the CUWC figure was 1,458.⁽¹⁵⁾ Although it could be claimed that this was making inroads into the Labour vote, the votes were nowhere near sufficient to allow the CUWC to emerge as the major opposition force, let alone win seats. However, they increased the turnout of votes from 12% to 50%.

The voting took place at a momentous time in the history of the city. The AEU lockout was in progress, and the unemployed were being stirred into greater activity by the presence of Wal Hannington in the city, and the arrest and imprisonment of the local CUWC leaders. The CUWC could organise mass action, but it did not follow that those people who joined the demonstrations gave political allegiance to the Committee's leaders. The CUWC, together with the Labour Party, must also have suffered by the fact that voting for Guardians was limited to the ratepayers and the families of ratepayers, and excluded lodgers. The Communist leaders felt that their record of activity, and the Labour Party's record of inactivity justified their putting themselves forward as the true champions of the working class, but this damaged the need for unity, and anyway did not lead to electoral success.

The leaders of the unemployed movement knew that the problem was a national one, and participated in national activity such as the establishment of the National Unemployed Workers Movement in April 1921 and the first

national hunger marches in October 1922. Nevertheless, local issues were of first importance and the unemployed had to try to influence the Guardians. The issues they raised concerned the amount of relief, the way it was distributed, the conditions attached, and the problems of single men and women and of strikers.

Some progress was made on the scales of relief, for on the whole the Coventry scales were higher than average, and certainly higher than the scales in Foleshill. Thus when new scales were introduced in September 1921 a couple with two children living in Foleshill could receive a maximum of £1 in cash and 15/- in kind, while a similar family in Coventry were entitled to £1-5s in cash and 19/6d in kind as well as $1\frac{1}{2}$ pints of milk a day.⁽¹⁶⁾ Furthermore, Foleshill Guardians were stricter in applying conditions, though in both areas the Relieving Officers were paid commission of $1\frac{1}{2}\%$ of all monies recovered from the families of recipients on top of their salaries.⁽¹⁷⁾

Coventry's scales were not the most generous in the country, and there were plenty on the Board and in the city who wished to ensure that they did not rise higher than they had to. One member complained in February 1921 that "It is evident that we are fast approaching the line beyond which there is a real danger of seriously impoverishing the people who have to foot the bill... the Guardians must draw a firm line between the provision of absolute necessities and the provision of relief which might in any way be termed attractive."⁽¹⁸⁾ Local business men kept up pressure on the Guardians from 1920 to ensure that money was carefully watched. The new rates of relief in September 1921 produced a deputation of protest from the Ratepayers Association which also produced material at the Guardians' elections calling on citizens to support Conservative and Liberal candidates.

The spokesman for the small businessman, Fred Lee, said in November 1921 that "When he received some of the letters, addressed to him by business men, some of them of a heart-rending nature upon the subject of the impost of high rates, it made him very depressed," and he went on to attack the Labour opposition who "think money drops from the clouds." (19) The Guardians were continually looking for ways of reducing expense.

Relief was primarily aimed at the old, the sick, and the dependents of paupers. Single able-bodied people were left to fend for themselves or else enter the Workhouse. Thus the Board decided at the onset of mass unemployment that "All applications from single able-bodied men be dealt with by an Order for Admission to the Institution and that all relief given in such cases be granted on loan." (20) This was following the normal practice of Boards of Guardians but was quite inappropriate at a time of heavy unemployment. The Guardians were banking on the deterrent of the Workhouse, for they could not have accommodated more than a small number of single unemployed, and anyway, such accommodation would hinder the men's chances of finding work. When a deputation from the CUWC went to the Board the Relieving Officer reported to the Guardians that "The persons compulsorily providing the relieving funds cannot be left out of account and methods of relief should accordingly be framed with an eye to both sides. Looked at in this way, it may in such times of widespread distress become a question of what can be publicly afforded, as well as what is necessary to meet the needs of the distress." (21) This was clearly opposed to the attitude of the CUWC that workers should not bear the brunt of the recession and led to several clashes between deputations and Guardians. The Guardians soon modified their position to a slight extent by providing relief in kind to able-bodied men who were willing to take the

test of physical labour; that is, they had to be prepared to do work in the Institute grounds in order to get relief. The Superintending Relieving Officer took a very frank attitude to this test when reporting to the Guardians:

"While work of public utility would be aimed at, the principal of the labour yard would be satisfied by the mere application of the test regardless of the fact whether the work were necessary and useful or not. The plan may then be uneconomical, and it would certainly be not only often impracticable, but in its effects on free labour as applied to the individual, it is also of a degenerating tendency. Still, it is important to consider the question of safeguards when relieving able-bodied men..." (22)

But this policy was also impracticable, for whether the work was useless or not, there was a limit to what the Guardians could provide, and they decided that instead of insisting on work "which is not of a beneficial nature" it would be better to get a larger employer such as the Council to provide "work of public utility such as the repairing and cleaning of roads or the creation of new bacteria beds on the sewage farms etc." (23) The Council, in turn, was not prepared for such a task, and although a few small schemes went ahead in 1921 they were on a very provisional and short term basis. Test work was not systematically put in hand until December 1922, when political conditions were more favourable. Until then the position of single men and women was very unclear. Some appear to have been offered outdoor relief for work in the Institution, some were able to plead special conditions such as dependents, and got outdoor relief, but most were refused all but the Workhouse. After September 1921 it was made clear that single people could apply for relief but that there was no scale for them and any relief was based on the discretion of the Relieving Officer. (24) This confusion over single people was not atypical. In the early days of mass unemployment in Coventry there was great confusion due

to the fact that the Guardians did not have any relief scale at all; proper scales were not issued until the end of January 1921, four months after the onset of mass unemployment.⁽²⁵⁾

Outdoor relief was also withheld from strikers, and again this brought the Guardians into conflict with the CUWC and the labour movement in the city. When there was a strike at Triumph Motors in May 1921, the House Committee at the Coventry Union met and decided that the regulations prevented them from granting any relief to strikers, and furthermore stated that "Where relief is being granted to the wives and children of the men concerned in the present trade dispute, that the husband should first enter the Institution."⁽²⁶⁾ Should the striker refuse to enter, then the Institute would be offered to the rest of the family with the prospect of no other form of relief. In the foundryworkers strike at the beginning of 1920 the Foleshill Guardians took a similar attitude, but relented to the extent of allowing strikers' families to get relief in the form of a loan.⁽²⁷⁾

Besides taking up the cases of the single and strikers, the CUWC lobbied for higher rates of relief, better administration, and proper treatment of people made to work. Initially, it had some success in forcing the Guardians to concentrate their minds and actually agree to issue relief to people who were not destitute, but when the Communist label stuck it became more difficult to win concessions. When work started on the Memorial Park, the Committee was able to negotiate a 2d an hour increase and better conditions, but during the period of competing unemployed movements, a favourable hearing, together with improvements, were given to the non-union group while the CUWC were ignored. The calibre of the demands made by the non-union leaders can be seen by the inclusion of the suggestion that local gentry be asked to provide rabbits for the unemployed.

Some of the largest demonstrations organised by the CUWC were concerned with political splits in the labour movement rather than with the Guardians. During the AEU lock-out a conference of trade union representatives was called to nominate Bob Williams, the ex-Communist, as the Labour Candidate in the next Parliamentary elections. This was deeply resented by the Communists, who claimed that their own candidate was acceptable to the trade union movement and had been nominated by the unemployed movement. This provided counter-claims from Labour supporters including one that prospective members of the Unemployed Movement had to commit themselves to support Jock Leckie, the Communist Candidate, in order to join the movement. As a result of this ill-feeling CUWC supporters at the conference challenged Williams' credentials and this led to a heated debate. As Harry Whitely, one of the CUWC candidates in the recent elections was speaking, for the fourth time, Edward Buckle, the district secretary of the Vehicle Builders Union was unlucky enough to be heard to say "Bugger the Unemployed!"⁽²⁸⁾

A subsequent meeting of the unemployed asked him to come to their meeting to explain, and when he refused, a crowd gathered outside his house and carried on making speeches and booing until dispersed by the police. Rashly, Buckle took out a summons against five of the leaders of the CUWC (Dingley, Heard, Preece, Whitely and Arden) and at a magistrates court on 4th April they were found guilty of conduct likely to cause a breach of the peace. They were ordered to find sureties of £10 each to be of good behaviour for the next six months. They refused this, and were sent to prison for a month.

In court at the same time was the unemployed leader Wal Hannington, charged with making a seditious speech in the city in March. He was able

to get the final sentence reduced to a binding over to keep the peace for six months. At first Hannington accepted this, but when the five decided to go to jail, he changed his mind and joined them. All six were then taken to Winson Green in Birmingham.⁽²⁹⁾ A large crowd, estimated at either 2,000 or 5,000 had gone to the court to show support, and in the evening a Free Speech Committee was formed and a large torch-light procession took place. Crowds gathered outside the Vehicle Builders office, and the next day Buckle issued a somewhat ungracious apology. When this was transmitted to the prisoners in Birmingham they decided to be bound over and were quickly released.⁽³⁰⁾ The incident is best seen as a reflection of the turmoil of a particular stage of the engineers' lock-out, when it was comparatively easy to create mass demonstrations. The incident was also part of the public row between the Communists and the Labour Party.

The strength of the CUWC lay not in its occasional stunts but in its persistence in offering a voice and an organisation for men who would otherwise have been complete rejects from the world of industry, and in its attempts to extract concessions from the City Council, the Lord Mayor's Boot Fund, the Guardians and the unemployment offices. At one of the early meetings of the Committee, all who attended heard a report from negotiations with the Labour Employment Committee, the Council management who were employing out of work engineers on the Memorial Park, factory gate meetings, and reports of negotiations about the quality of the food provided by the Municipal Restaurant which offered free meals for children. One of the people present complained that "We are doing what the Labour Councillors should do" and a resolution was passed urging councillors to attend their meetings.⁽³¹⁾ But they never did, and this was the strength of the CUWC, far more so than activities of men like the first leader, H.M. Emery, who

later had to flee to Russia to avoid a prosecution for stealing arms for the IRA.

The spirit and the fight shown by the unemployed movement over the years 1920-1923 was significant in that it changed, albeit in a small way, the political life in the city bringing the area of poor relief into the political arena. Before 1920 the usual view of the Board of Guardians was that it was a non-political charitable exercise carried out voluntarily by the social leaders of the community as part of their social obligations, and at some expense to themselves. It was similar to helping to run the Mayor's Distress Fund, promoting building societies, charitable bodies, and indeed, sitting on the City Council. The view survived long after the unemployed movement had disappeared, but from 1920 onwards it was challenged by another view, whereby the institution of the Guardians, the Workhouse and all the bureaucracy that went with it were seen as having an essentially repressive function. Relief was dispensed but on such terms and in such a way as to humiliate and degrade men and women. It was the non-industrial counterpart to the bullying foremen in the factory. It followed that its function was not purely social in any narrow way, but political, one of the bodies used by the dominant social classes to perpetuate their dominance in the city. The Guardians' elections showed that most workers did not develop this attitude as far as the CUWC would have liked, but there appears to have been a widespread belief that the Guardians were hostile to claimants. This view was not based on personal animosity, on a dislike of the Guardians themselves. Indeed, although there were sharp disagreements between the different sides, there was little personal conflict in the struggles for decent scales of relief.

Here the situation in Coventry was quite different from that in

neighbouring Foleshill Rural District, where some working people and unemployed came to develop a deep hatred for the Relieving Officers and the Guardians who stood behind them. As we have seen, Foleshill Rural District contained many of the outlying towns and villages that surrounded much of Coventry, and in the elections, the gentry and shopocracy had no difficulty in getting seats. But parts of Foleshill and the council estate at Stoke Heath was in the District, and in these areas unemployment and poverty was the greatest for the whole of the area, while in the rest of Foleshill, poverty was not great. At a time when pauperism was at the level of about one in nine of the City of Coventry, it was virtually non-existent in Ansty and Bedworth but it was one in four at Stoke Heath.⁽³²⁾ What this meant was made clear in the annual report of the health conditions in the Rural District by Dr. Harold Webster in June 1922. He found that most of the children under the age of one were in a reasonable condition, but went on to report:

"The condition of the older children, however, is not as satisfactory. So many of those between one and five years of age are below the average in size and weight, some of them very badly so. Far too many of them also show signs of rickets. These conditions must be attributable, to a large extent, to the unemployment and distress in the district. These children cannot be getting the diet they need. Butter, eggs, vegetables, and fruit are, in many cases, impossible to get on the income allowed." (33)

A month after the publication of the report, the relief scales were reduced as a result of the fall in the cost of living; the total relief paid in both cash and kind for the first child in a family came to 4/-, while subsequent children were valued at 2/- a week. This did not stop members of the Board insulting those on relief; one of the more outspoken, W.H.Malcolm, attacked the Stoke Heath Unemployed Workers' Committee, saying it contained people "Who were not too scrupulous in the way they liked to be kept."⁽³⁴⁾

This was typical of the statements made.

Another person who tended to have a low opinion of claimants was W.E. Thomas the Relieving Officer, who was the subject of many complaints from people who had either been turned away by him or had been insulted. At a Board meeting in September 1921 Thomas spoke of watching a young man who had claimed relief; this man, he said, "Had recently been kept under observation, and was seen to take a girl to a picture house."⁽³⁵⁾ Shortly after that the Foleshill unemployed committee sent a deputation to the Guardians, claiming that Thomas was refusing relief to people who took part in demonstrations, and had violently ejected people from the Workhouse. The Labour members of the Guardians moved a motion criticising him but this was defeated.⁽³⁶⁾ Thomas implemented the Guardians' policy of not paying any relief to strikers during the lock-out, and one Friday evening found himself being driven out of the Foleshill Board Room by a crowd of strikers. He claimed to the Board that he was forced to seek refuge in his local pub, but to no avail, for when he went out, the crowd was still there, and threatened to "throw him into a pit." They followed him home and demonstrated outside his house. One of the people who was "molesting" Thomas in this way was Benjamin Fowler, who was one of the leaders of the Stoke Heath Unemployed Committee, and Thomas retaliated by cutting off his relief. Again, he was backed up by the Guardians, though this time only by a vote of 11 to 10, the Guardians deciding that until Fowler apologised, the only relief he and his family could receive would be in the workhouse. Despite Fowler's refusal to accept this, and complaints from other sources, this decision was not altered.⁽³⁷⁾

The attitude of the Guardians, and, of course, the high level of

unemployment, quickly led to the formation of a Stoke Heath Unemployed Committee, which soon became affiliated to the CUWC. A similar body was set up in Foleshill, but was not as active as the one in Stoke Heath. The Stoke Heath residents had had an organisation during their rent strike in 1919, so it is not surprising to find an organisation quickly emerging in 1920. It won support from the local Parish Council, which called for the rates of relief adopted by national conferences of the unemployed movement. The Parish Council also attacked the behaviour of the Guardians, on one occasion complaining of the "Abhorrent and despicable action of the Foleshill Board of Guardians in the treatment meted out to the Stoke Heath and Foleshill unemployed."⁽³⁸⁾ The Parish Council had little power however, and this particular resolution was passed over without comment by the Foleshill Guardians.

One of the most important struggles of the Stoke Heath Unemployed was against relief in kind. In the early stages of mass unemployment, claimants were given tickets to be exchanged at specific grocers' shops for specific goods. This was objected to because it put the claimants in a humiliating position, and also because it made possible the exploitation of their condition by grocers and Rural District officials. Recipients also complained about the poor quality of the food, but the Guardians passed a motion stating "that butchers meat only be granted on the special recommendation of the District Medical Officer in cases of illness!"⁽³⁹⁾ Not until September 1921 did the Guardians agree to make payments in cash, and even then relief was partly in cash and partly in kind. This was eight months after the Coventry Board had decided on cash scales.

Foleshill quickly became notorious for relief in kind, low scales, delays and hostile questioning of claimants. This caused the unemployed

committee to protest frequently, and as the Guardians would try to avoid recognition of unemployed organisations, this led to clashes outside and inside the Workhouse. On 14th September 1921 "A very considerable crowd of unemployed men" marched to the Workhouse, and representatives of both the Stoke Heath Unemployed Committee and the AEU tried to get in to see the Guardians.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Eventually, three people representing both groups were allowed in, and they attacked the hostility of the Guardians to the unemployed, and threatened to go beyond peaceful protests. Five days later, at a meeting that decided on a scale of relief, another considerable crowd turned up. Although they were spoken to by Alec Read and Mrs. Smith, the Guardians refused to see them, and when the crowd threatened to break in, the meeting was hastily adjourned, and departing Guardians had to run the gauntlet of the unemployed demonstration. At the next meeting, a crowd again turned up, but this time was confronted by 26 policemen, the whole of the Foleshill division. The Guardians voted not to accept a deputation. A few weeks later, the Relieving Officer, W.E. Thomas, was giving evidence in court against a man accused of obtaining relief fraudulently. He claimed that such behaviour was widespread, and asked for the magistrates to make an example, which they did by giving the man three weeks in prison for falsely claiming one week's relief.⁽⁴¹⁾ During the lock-out, trade unionists found the Guardians' attitude particularly provocative, and there were further disturbances outside the Workhouse.

The rapid appearance of the CUWC in 1920, attracted some national attention, and also brought some of the Coventry leaders onto the national stage, particularly Tom Dingley. When the first hunger marches began, he played a leading role and thus ensured that the hunger marches would come into the Coventry area. These marches began in the autumn of 1922, and

were a desperate rearguard action on the part of activists to stem the demoralisation that was spreading after a number of union defeats, particularly in engineering. They involved groups of marchers staying in London for months at a time, with various groups coming to reinforce them as marchers went home. They were not very well organised, with the result that for several months at the end of 1922 there were small bands of marchers from all over the country on the move at any one time, heading for London. Once they got there, they joined in demonstrations until their local Guardians cut their relief off, or until they were rounded up by the police and sent home by train. If this happened they would sometimes then start again. Dingley was one of those sent back to Coventry, but this did not deter him from setting off again.⁽⁴²⁾ The Marchers relied on the generosity of the local guardians for meals and shelter while they were on the road, and across the country there were arguments and skirmishes as marchers protested against their treatment.

One of the first group of marchers to come to Coventry was from Barrow, and the Guardians agreed, at the request of the CUWC, to provide for them for the night, after they had heard that they would be re-imbursed by Barrow Guardians. The marchers' leader complained bitterly to the clerk to the Workhouse about their treatment. He "strongly protested against the treatment which he stated had been meted out to the marchers: the coarseness of the food and the manner in which it was served, and stated that the treatment from other Boards of Guardians en route had been much more humane in every way, and hot meals had been provided."⁽⁴³⁾ The main objection was that the marchers and their sympathisers had been left to fend for themselves, with no hot food. The evening meal had consisted of 1 lb of bread, $\frac{1}{4}$ lb of corned beef, and $1\frac{1}{2}$ pints of tea, and breakfast had been the same

except that tea had been replaced by coffee.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The accommodation in the drill hall was also criticised.

A deputation from the CUWC went to complain to the Guardians after the marchers had gone, but were refused entry, and a letter they sent was ignored. The protest that Jack Preece, leader of the deputation, sent to the local paper expresses the anger and humiliation that unemployed leaders were feeling due to the tougher attitude taken by the Guardians after the lock-out. He wrote:

"It is typical of the cowardly conduct of the Board of Guardians that they refused to receive the deputation who waited upon them, and also typical of their discourtesy that they allowed three ill-fed and ill-clad men, namely Messrs. Ward, Kingston and myself, to wait on the pavement on a cold, damp morning, for one and a half hours outside a warm and comfortable Board Room, after which they decided to send out a subordinate to convey to the deputation their decision not to receive them. More despicable, in our opinion was the decision to restrict the powers of the sub-committee appointed to deal with the feeding of the marchers to those of supplying such fare as bully beef and dry bread, especially when we bear in mind the fact that, in some instances the cost of whatever was supplied was recoverable from other Boards of Guardians." (45)

Not surprisingly, Preece was unimpressed when the Board passed a motion of thanks to the Unemployed Committee!

In the next couple of months, two smaller groups of marchers, from Rugeley and Birmingham, were put up in Coventry, and again were subject to harsh treatment, this time being made to stay in the Workhouse, and treated as vagrant or casual labour.⁽⁴⁶⁾ A more serious incident took place in February 1923. Hannington led a group through the Midlands, and the Ministry of Health instructed the local guardians to treat the marchers as casuals. At Rugby, the guardians refused to give the marchers more than the casual diet, so the marchers tricked the police, broke into the Workhouse, and stole and then ate, some jam. The march then went on to Coventry, where

it was thought that Hannington was to be arrested. This time, however, they were given school halls to sleep in, and were fed in the evening and the morning at the Municipal restaurant, at an average cost to the Guardians of 1/- per person per meal. Hearing that the police were out in force at their next scheduled stop, Birmingham, which had a reputation for police infringements of civil liberties, the marchers decided to spend an extra day in Coventry, and got the Guardians, after some persuasion, to give them an extra meal. However, extra police were drafted in from Birmingham during that day, and encircled the marchers at night.

After breakfast the following morning, the marchers were stopped on the way out of the Municipal restaurant, and an attempt was made to arrest Hannington. This led to a pitched battle in the centre of the city between police and marchers, and Hannington and his men escaped and barricaded themselves in the hall at Trinity School where they were surrounded by police and the fire brigade, who threatened to flood them out. Eventually discretion proved the better part of valour, Hannington gave himself up, and was later fined five pounds for organising the theft of the jam, while another of the marchers, tried at Coventry, got two months hard labour for assaulting policemen.⁽⁴⁷⁾ The marchers claimed that they received better treatment on the rest of their journey due to the publicity they got at Rugby and Coventry, but the Coventry Guardians reacted against the marchers. Henceforth, they decided, future marchers would be treated as necessitous wayfarers. They would be searched, made to have a bath, given a supper of bread, margarine, porridge and a hot drink, and a breakfast of bread and margarine and a hot drink.⁽⁴⁸⁾ These incidents together with the events in London, although they served as an attempt to rally working people against the Poor Laws, made it easy for the press to blame the marchers as

violent revolutionaries, and it hardened the attitude of the Guardians against the local unemployed workers.

The issue that particularly concerned the unemployed committee as well as many trade unions in Coventry was the task work scheme that was brought into operation in December 1922. A previous attempt had failed at the beginning of 1921 because the City Council had not been able to provide the work. Although by this time the peak of the unemployment crisis in the city was over, a scheme of test work went ahead, using men on relief to either improve recreation grounds, lay gas mains, do maintenance work, improve Pool Meadow, or for some unfortunate workers, break stones. The Guardians made it clear that the object of the exercise was not to find jobs for those out of work but to check up on those receiving benefit, and by penalising them, force them to find work. Thus it was stated that the test work was "For the purpose of testing genuineness of the application for relief and not for the purpose of supplying the Authority with labour specially suitable for the class of work to be undertaken!"⁽⁴⁹⁾ The men were not employed, so there was no employers' liability, no contract of service or National Insurance stamps. They were not paid wages, but merely required, if called upon, to give one hour's labour for every shilling poor relief they received. For those to whom the scheme applied, they were called upon to work one week in two. Naturally, the trade unions saw the scheme as cheap labour, but when they protested, as the Trades Council did in February 1923, they received some strong answers. The Clerk to the Guardians replied to the Trades Council by claiming that the scheme was a generous one, compared with the alternative of the Outdoor Labour Test Order of December 1844, which would have put people in the Workhouse,⁽⁵⁰⁾ (if the Workhouse had been big enough to hold them).

In fact, most of the categories of work could not be seen as a form of cheap labour undercutting union rates, as the work was unimportant and pointless. Jack Preece, who tried to complain on several occasions on behalf of the test workers, though with little success, wrote of his impressions:

"The spectacle of weak, emaciated unfortunates - men whose lives have been passed, in the main, in factories and shops - swinging a pick or shovel, up to their ankles in a mixture of clay and water, with broken boots and worn-out clothes, is a pitiable one, and gives one pause to think whether any true economy will be affected by this wonderful scheme which appears to be the child of a phantasmic brain These 'task workers' cannot carry out the work effectively, and, in a short time, sections of the work, say, for instance, the Memorial Park, will have to be completely overhauled by men skilled in the work." (51)

When Preece and others were able to see the Guardians they complained about the lack of drinking water, facilities for making tea, and shelter for periods of bad weather, but in particular, the need for replacement boots.⁽⁵²⁾ The concession the Guardians made was to agree to provide a hot drink at midday, and to appeal to the public and Mayor's fund for boots.

The trade unions and their supporters continued to attack the scheme without much success. In March, the Trades Council raised the matter with the Ministry of Health, but received no help. In April the Labour Guardians tried to protect union rates of pay, without success. In May, the Trades Council went to the local authority gas workers Joint Industrial Council in the West Midlands to complain that recognised rates of pay were being broken, but without success. In the same month a number of branches of different unions wrote to the Guardians complaining that test work "Is a degradation of the standard of life of the workmen upon whom it is imposed, by substituting cheap labour for that performance of work which should be

done at ordinary rates."⁽⁵³⁾ The resolutions were not even fully discussed.

By the spring of 1923 the backbone of the unemployed resistance to task work and other humiliations had been broken, mainly due to the fall in the number out of work. By March 1923 there were only about 4,000 out of work in the city, about half the figure of the previous November, which suggests a quite rapid recovery in industry. With the increase in the number of new jobs, there was a decline in the authority of the CUWC. Earlier, it had been able to establish a broader body, a Trades Council Unemployment Committee, which brought together representatives from the unions and Council with the unemployed, and the body sent delegates to the Guardians, but this fusion was a result of the decline in activity of the unemployed movement.⁽⁵⁴⁾ So fast was the change in economic circumstances and the decline of the CUWC that the National body was caught out, for it had been agreed that the next Conference of the National Unemployed Workers Committee Movement would meet in the city. Preece lamented that Coventry was

"A one-time centre of revolutionary activity, but today a back-wash of deadly apathy and indifference. When the support of the local committee was something like what it now ought to be, it was suggested that Coventry be favoured by a visit from delegates of the Unemployed Movement. That was before the slump which followed the engineers' lock-out, in which Coventry unemployed played no mean part." ⁽⁵⁵⁾

The slump he referred to was primarily one of working class morale, for the dislocation caused by the lock-out was short-lived. But this defeat led to thousands of workers leaving unions, and most did not rejoin when they got back into their jobs. A smaller unemployed movement found it more difficult to link up with militants in the workplace, and did not

have the strength to defeat a task work scheme imposed on people who had in many cases been out of work for several years. The leadership quickly found itself high and dry, and although there still remained enough activists to organise and carry through the National Congress of the Unemployed, this effectively marked the end of the unemployed struggle in the city.

As unemployed workers had very little economic power, it was not surprising to find that the peak period of activity and influence of the unemployment movement was during the lock-out, when their labour could be put to use on picket lines, and the ability of the CUWC to bring significant numbers of the unemployed into struggle on the side of the workers and not against them was a major contribution to the union side. Perhaps more important in the long term was the fact that the unemployed movement propagated ideas about the right to work or full maintenance, and was able to develop a political consciousness that challenged the right of the well-to-do to declare themselves as overseers of the poor and Guardians of the public interest. This developing of political insight in practical terms did not lead to any major challenge to the ruling groups in the city. Indeed in the local elections in the first half of the 1920s the Labour group lost ground, but it contributed to the growing political maturity of the people who were later to emerge as leaders of a stronger labour movement.

However, the over-estimation of the revolutionary potential of the situation, unnecessary revolutionary rhetoric, and the splitting of the working class movement on the issue of unemployment were serious weaknesses that detracted from the achievements of the unemployed movement. The leadership overestimated the effect of unemployment on most workers. Some workers were members of the "Red Card Organisation" accepting Communist

leadership and committed to support a Communist in the General Election, at one period of time, and then once back at work became non-unionised and outside the labour movement. Part of the explanation for this lies with the special problems involved in the organisation of unemployed workers; being removed from the work process it could afford political flights of fancy, while for most workers whatever commitments made disappeared when the prospect of a job was seen. Nevertheless, the strengths and weaknesses of the unemployed struggles owed a lot to the political leadership of the CP.

II The Communist Party

The formation of the Communist Party was an attempt to unite the different revolutionary socialist groups that had welcomed the Russian Revolution. The BSP had not survived the war in Coventry, but elsewhere was the major constituent of the Communist Party of Great Britain when it came into being in August 1920. In Coventry, the most important group that formed the nucleus of the local Party branch came from the SLP which meant the people concerned had to make some fairly important changes in political outlook to accept the line of the new Party, particularly the commitment to pursue entry into the Labour Party. The situation in Coventry was also complicated by the divisions in the local ILP.

Nationally, only a minority of SLP members appear to have joined the Communist Party, but the opposite was true in Coventry. William Gee, who was in Coventry at the time, was expelled by the SLP for being one of the rebels who signed a Manifesto calling for unity with other left groups. When he attended the branch meeting of the SLP in Coventry, the branch

decided to accept the expulsion, but passed a resolution to the effect that "We reaffirm our decision to join the first stable Communist Party that is formed, whether by the executives of present parties or of an unofficial party that may be formed."⁽⁵⁶⁾ When the CPGB was formed, the majority of the SLP remained true to their word, and joined, as did most SLP members in Birmingham.

There were only about twenty members of the SLP in the city, and the minority carried on using the name. In November Jack Preece, who shortly afterwards switched to the CP., contested Hillfields ward in the municipal elections, and other electoral battles were undertaken although with very little success in the early 1920s.

The people who were involved in the Workers Committee and not in the SLP also came into the CP, though again there were not many of them. A small number formed a Coventry branch of the CP (BSTI) and did not join the CPGB until 1921. This meant that the early CP was dominated by men like Dingley, Emery, Preece and Jackson, people used to industrial conflict rather than political struggle. Basil Thompson, whose job was to report to the Cabinet on the activities of the revolutionaries, had an agent in Coventry, who noted that the Coventry CP were having difficulty swallowing affiliation to the Labour Party, and reported that a number of meetings had "broken up in an angry mood."⁽⁵⁷⁾ Although this agent was given to flights of fancy from time to time, he was very close to the CP if not actually in it, and this particular report is likely to have been true. Later, another ex-SLP member, Jack Leckie, came to Coventry from Scotland, and found himself the CP candidate in the General Election. This also created problems, for he had been described in the SLP newspaper as "A physical force Anarchist and ardent anti-Parliamentarian, who breathes

dynamite and talks red armies! "(58)

Another slightly unusual source of recruits to the early Communist Party was the ILP. After negotiations for a merger had broken down at national level, the Communist Party called on the left-wing group in the ILP to use its influence to bring local branches into the Party. One of the few places where this happened was at Coventry. The local ILP branch voted 92 to 73 to join the CP and local Communists took this as a signal to move into the ILP Club and Hall and change its name to the Communist Club. The minority took the case to court, and won a Chancery case, and the Communists had to move out. The Chancery case revealed some of the names of the pro-Communist ILP members, and it is interesting to note among them that of Harry Emery, ex-SLP so the majority vote had clearly not been a completely spontaneous affair! (59) Although we do not know how many of the ex-ILP members stayed for any time in the CP, and although there seems to be a case for saying that many played no part in the work of the Party, another small nucleus of activities had been drawn into the Party.

Ex-servicemen were another source of recruits to the Party, but here the stumbling block was the existence of the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers, which, while sounding left-wing on many issues, was also patriotic and anti-Bolshevik. It stepped up its activities after its intervention in the General Election in 1918, and for the next year was very active and ran candidates in the local elections in November 1919. It excited the police agent in the Coventry left, who referred to it frequently in the secret reports to the Government. In May 1919 he claimed that it "Receives much sympathy from the general public" while in June he reported that its meetings were chaired

by trade union officers, and it was considering linking up with a union.⁽⁶⁰⁾ However, in late 1919 the reports mention that the more consistently left-wing National Union of Ex-servicemen, based on Birmingham, was gaining ground at the expense of the other organisation, which in response was tending to drop its political attitudes.⁽⁶¹⁾ After much wooing, and the placing of the right people in the right jobs, the National Union of Ex-servicemen in the city began to co-operate with the CP on unemployed marches, where they operated as a workers militia on a few occasions,⁽⁶²⁾ and eventually several branches were reported as going over to join the CP. The credit for this victory was given to Bert Cresswell, who played an important part in the development of the labour movement in the city. However, as with the influx from the ILP, the new recruits did not seem to have made a big impact on the party.

The Fortnightly reports on revolutionary organisations circulated to the Cabinet contain much that is of interest on the activity of the local CP, which in the period 1920-1922 received special attention from the authorities, possibly because in the city they were fortunate to have an agent with access to the left. Nevertheless, some of the reports are quite wild. At the end of the war, for example, Thomson, the compiler of the Cabinet bulletin wrote

"A Report, not yet confirmed, has reached me that 100,000 red flags have been made for distribution in Barrow and Coventry and the neighbourhood, and that the Shop Stewards in these places intend to formulate a demand for a thirty-two hours' week, a minimum wage of £6 for skilled and £5 per week for unskilled labour, with a time limit for acceptance, and that failing acceptance they will "down tools" and proceed with the revolutionary movement." (63)

On a later occasion, a report says that Coventry extremists had plans to seize the Drill Hall and various public buildings at a given moment. There were about a thousand Irish and ex-servicemen organised ready to seize the

arms kept in the drill hall.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Although this is almost certainly pure fantasy, it could either be the fantasy of the agent, or the fantasy of the men he was reporting on. After all, some of the direct actionists like Harry Emery did have big ideas. (At one disruption of the City Council meeting, Emery explained from the public gallery that he thought the building would make a useful centre for the Coventry Soviet.)⁽⁶⁵⁾ Consequently, all of the wild reports cannot be dismissed out of hand. Other reports do show a lot of knowledge about the work of the CP though not a great deal of insight. The reports from Coventry show a marked tendency to overfact, being pessimistic and optimistic by turns. Again, to some extent this was a reflection of the feelings of the left. Perhaps the perplexed comment that "Coventry has passed through cycles of extreme revolutionary feeling" was as equally valid as other statements referring to the political apathy of the city's workers.⁽⁶⁶⁾

The Hands Off Russia Campaign in the city which ran from 1918 to 1920 was successful in putting out a lot of publicity and involving some trade union leaders. In May 1919 a very inaccurate secret report spoke of the "disquieting" news from the city over the agitation for support for the Soviet Union, and concluded "Coventry is a place where anti-Bolshevik propaganda should be concentrated."⁽⁶⁷⁾ But in 1920, co-incidental with the birth of the CP, the Government stepped up its intervention in the Soviet Union as there appeared to be a real prospect of Polish collapse. A National Council of Action was set up to pursue a strike against the war, and local Councils appeared as well. Within a week of the National Conference in London, A.E. Mabbs, president of the Trades Council, was presiding over the first meeting of the Coventry Council, with Len Jackson, a Communist, the secretary.⁽⁶⁸⁾ A demonstration in Pool Meadow was large

enough to require two platforms, and speakers ranged from Hugh Farren, the "moderate" member of the Board of Guardians, and councillors, to Harry Emery.⁽⁶⁹⁾ Although the issue died down when the Government retreated, in Coventry the campaign overlapped with the first mass meetings and demonstrations over unemployment, so the political temperature remained at a high level, and the newly-formed CP had an excellent opportunity to engage in mass work. Unfortunately, the unity shown over the intervention in Russia did not continue over unemployment as we saw earlier. Thompson's report in October 1920 claimed that Emery in particular, as leader of the CUWC was continually abusing local union officers, and this had prompted the establishment of an AEU Unemployed Committee in opposition.⁽⁷⁰⁾ An example was when the AEU invited the local MP, Sir Edward Manville, to speak on the unemployment position in the city. The report in Solidarity, probably written by Emery, said "It was an education for the workers to see their 'labour leaders' on the platform with him and to witness their crawling attitude".

The report went on to say that Emery spoke, exposing 'capitalism in all its nakedness, calling the workers to prepare for Soviets.'⁽⁷¹⁾

This was typical of the black and white attitude to subjects taken by the revolutionaries at the time .

As a result of the successful inauguration of the CUWC, and of the publicity it achieved, the CP made a special effort to build a dynamic branch in the city. Thomson's agent complained in November 1920 that the city had "been treated as a forcing ground for the British revolution,"⁽⁷²⁾ and it is true that it had more than its fair share of outside speakers. Jim Stewart, the Midlands Organiser for the CP spent several weeks in the city, and McManus, Ebury, Gallacher and others turned up to address meetings.

Most important of all, Jack Leckie was moved into the city to share the leadership of the unemployed movement.

However, in its early days, the CP was very small. Thomson's agent claimed the active membership in early October 1920 was about 15, but admitted this was growing as "Many extremists are visiting Coventry, which is regarded as suitable for the establishment of Soviet Control."⁽⁷³⁾ There was also a smaller group in the CP (BSTI). A month later the Party decided not to select a candidate for any future parliamentary elections. However, the small size of the local branch did not stop it from making a local impact in running the unemployment committees, carrying on with the Council of Action (after they had died out in most other areas) setting up a Workers Committee, and general agitation.

Party activity continued at a high level until about the spring of 1921. During the spring and summer of that year, Communists in the Midlands, and Birmingham in particular, were subject to increased police pressure, and many of their leaders were arrested. In Coventry, Leckie, Jackson, Dingley and Emery all got jail sentences of several months, though not for activities carried out in the city. However, even in Coventry, the police were always on the look-out for the utterance of seditious words, which is what most of the Communists were being arrested for, and it was necessary to have their own shorthand writer at all public meetings.⁽⁷⁴⁾ These arrests weakened the activity of the small CP group, as did the court case with the ILP which took up time and cost money. (After the case, the Party was in financial difficulties until it was able to turn up a sympathetic cinema manager in Nuneaton who gave it £80.)⁽⁷⁵⁾ Attempts were made to use the prison sentences to build support - when Emery returned from a sentence in Winson Green attempts were made to welcome him

back with a procession and the band of the CUWC - the "Red Orchestra." Shop keepers were invited to put out bunting, though it is difficult to believe that any did.⁽⁷⁶⁾

From autumn 1921 onwards, the CP began to make up ground, and was able to galvanise the unemployed movement back into activity, particularly in Foleshill and Stoke Heath. In the period before the AEU lock-out, the number of mass meetings was stepped up. This did not stop the decline in Party membership in the city, as the non-active people who had joined from the ILP and the National Union of Ex-servicemen left, but the effective membership increased.⁽⁷⁷⁾ A recognition of this growing strength was the reversal of an earlier decision not to put up a candidate in the next General Election, and the nomination of Jack Leckie. This was followed by a campaign to get labour movement organisations to support his candidature, and this inevitably brought the CP into conflict with the Labour Party. The conflict was exacerbated by the fact that Labour's Candidate was Bob Williams, leader of the Transport Workers, who had been expelled from the Communist Party for his part in the fiasco in April 1921, when the transport union and the railwaymen had refused to support the miners. This resurgence of activity did not go unnoticed by Thomson's agent, who was described by Thomson as being "particularly well informed," and who wrote as follows

"Violent speeches, (he reported), by Tom Dingley, Leonard Jackson, and other local agitators, which are now of almost daily occurrence, take place entirely unchecked, and it is generally thought that the seeds of serious trouble are being sown in the city. Twelve months ago these extremists had a comparatively small following in Coventry. They were discredited by the great majority of the workers, and there was very little sympathy for them when they were prosecuted. The large amount of prolonged unemployment amongst the engineering workers of this centre, however, has made fertile soil for the Communist propaganda, and revolutionary doctrines are gaining much support of late.

The national leaders of the Communist movement make a special mark of Coventry, and such men as James Stewart, Jack Leckie, ex-Colonel Malone, George Ebury, William Gee, and William Gallacher, are so well known here that they are almost regarded as local men. There is no doubt that a great deal will be heard of these men during Leckie's electioneering campaign. I wish to point out the urgent need for counter propaganda in Coventry at the present time." (78)

Although the period of the lock-out saw the CP at its most vigorous in the city, and they were able to make an important intervention, there was never much chance of Leckie emerging as a serious rival to the Labour candidate. The Labour Party claimed that Leckie had received no support from the trade union movement in the city,⁽⁷⁹⁾ and although the CUWC supported him, it was not without some disagreement and dissention. Leckie was very much to the fore in the lock-out, and so was presented with an ideal opportunity to get maximum publicity. This was seized, but so enthusiastically, that the Labour Party were able to accuse him of manipulating the lock-out struggles for his own ends. Bob Williams, in direct contrast to Leckie, played no part in organising workers, pickets and unemployed during the lock-out, but instead wrote to the local paper to attack Leckie, "Whose efforts," he said, "Together with those of the individuals with whom he is associated, I consider are calculated to injure the political Labour movement." He refused to be associated with Leckie at meetings, or to take part in his demonstrations, for "Whilst it affords an effective opportunity for the airing of political views, too much political propaganda may weaken the morale of the men," Because of the wrong leadership, the less organised sections of those in the dispute could be put off the need to struggle and "Betray their loyalty to their own organisation rather than be led away by the diatribes of Communist propaganda."⁽⁸⁰⁾

At the time, the contrast between the active candidate and the inactive

one must have been to the advantage of Leckie, but in the confusion and defeat that followed the end of the lock-out militancy disappeared, and no doubt many workers were forced to accept the employers' view that the unions had been making essentially revolutionary demands for control of industry. Reacting to the changed circumstances, the CP Executive Committee decided to reverse their decision again, and in August 1922, decided not to run a candidate, in the interests of left unity. One comment on the decision to drop the Communist candidate stated that it had caused a serious division in the Party, and took several meetings to come to the final decision.⁽⁸¹⁾ At the end of 1921, the Comintern called for a united working front, and it was this new line which led to the calling off of Leckie's candidature.

This united front policy was not taken by most CP members to conflict with the need for Communists to win leadership of struggles at local level. Although the CP accepted the need to work within the existing trade unions, it also sought to win union bodies at all levels to support for the Red International of Trade Unions. It also ran the Workers' Committee movement as a separate entity until June 1922. In practice this meant campaigning against the existing trade union leadership, and trying to wrest leadership from them. Thus in the miners' struggles in 1921, the Party campaigned under the slogan "Watch your leaders" and warned of the dangers of betrayal. In January 1922 Tom Bell in The Communist wrote of the duties of Communists at work, saying that their role was to discredit the trade union bureaucracy and "Communists must everywhere step to the front and take the leadership."⁽⁸²⁾ But in practice this could be read as support for attacks on labour leaders that would ruin any chances of a united front.

In Coventry we have already noted that in the leadership of the CUWC there was a tendency to overstress the revolutionary nature of the movement and to criticise the trade union leadership, and this stemmed from the fact that many of the leaders of the CP locally came from organisations like the SLP and the CP(BSTI) which had rejected policies such as the united front in the past. Although Communist influence in the workplaces was very small - Thomson's agent thought there were only six members of the Coventry CP still in jobs in December 1921 - they had some influence in the AEU.⁽⁸³⁾ Here most of the activity was centred around the Coventry Workers' Committee. Tom Dingley, who had special responsibilities for the Workers Committee reported in December 1921 to the NAC of the Workers' Committee Movement that there was constant competition between the Committee and the CP locally, despite the fact that the Committee was under Communist influence.⁽⁸⁴⁾ An additional source of confusion was the existence of a Coventry branch of the Red International of Labour Unions. Whatever the case for its existence at international level, in the early 1920s it served only to confuse at local level. The Coventry group, with W.H.Chalmers, a patternmaker, its organiser, was one of the first local groups to be established in the country.

Like the Workers' Committee, it was a propaganda body, and this meant that the CP, the Workers' Committee, and RILU were doing the same sort of work, but operating separately despite all of them having a small and overlapping membership. One of the amendments for debate at the fourth CPGB Congress was relevant to the situation in Coventry when it referred to "small non-party sectarian bands outside or inside the workshop, which only duplicate the duties of Communist nuclei."⁽⁸⁵⁾

The report of the Control Commission on the organisation of the CP showed that there was virtually no connection between the work of RILU and the rest of the Party.⁽⁸⁶⁾ Until the adoption of this report there was no clear understanding of the way the different organs of the Party were supposed to function, and this made it difficult for the leadership to ensure that their policies were put into operation at local level.

Although the CP was refused affiliation to the Labour Party, it was still possible in the early 1920s for Communists to be members of the Labour Party and a number of CP members stood as Labour candidates in the General Election. In Coventry a number of CP members were sent into the Labour Party, but not until after the lock-out. In 1923 a prominent Communist, Bert Cresswell, stood as Labour candidate in the local elections, and the next year got himself elected to the Executive of the local Labour Party. It is significant that this sort of activity only happened in 1923, for by then the dominance in the Coventry CP of the ex-SLPers and the syndicalists had disappeared, and a different type of leadership was emerging. Prior to this time, the nearest the CP had come to working with the Labour Party was at the municipal elections in 1921. When Labour decided not to contest two wards, Graham and Dingley stood as unofficial Labour candidates, though the Midland Daily Telegraph consistently referred to them as Communists, and this had an impact on the number of votes they received.⁽⁸⁷⁾ All this meant that up to 1923 the Communists neglected the opportunity that existed to influence the early days of the Coventry Labour Party, and it was not surprising that their belated conversion to the policy of the united front was treated with some scepticism by the Labour Party. Some of the leaders of the Coventry CP in fact refused to accept the united front policy. Cyril Taylor was the Party

branch secretary for some years in the 1920s, and recalled the disagreements between the branch and the Party centre, and the arrival of Pollitt to try to sort out the differences. Continued political disagreements was one of the reasons for the decline in the Coventry CP in the late 1920s.

III The Labour Party

A recent historian of the Labour Party has written "until 1918, and for some time thereafter, the characteristic local organ of the Labour Party was the Trades Council, acting either in that name or nominally disguised as the 'Trades Council and Labour Party'."⁽⁸⁸⁾ This does not quite fit the picture in Coventry. The Labour Party as a separate entity remained very weak for a number of years, but the war had also seen the decline of the influence of the Trades and Labour Council. Before 1914 it could claim to be the body that represented the bulk of the labour movement in the city, though there remained a substantial minority of union branches that did not affiliate to it, but during the war the CEJC emerged as being the important executive body for the trade unions, and the Trades Council was not intimately involved in the disputes of the war years. Although affiliation increased after the war, and reached a peak of over 27,000 in 1920 it never regained its position as the most important forum of labour.⁽⁸⁹⁾ It still made an important political contribution to the Labour Party, as it encouraged trade union branches to affiliate and send delegates to the Party, but in terms of activists, the contribution of the ILP was greater.

McKibbin has commented that "In Britain alone the left wing of the working-class movement did not emerge from the war in some way stronger

than it entered it," and it is true that ILP activity suffered during the war.⁽⁹⁰⁾ Nevertheless, in the years from 1919 to 1921, there was an energetic ILP branch in the city which was active in the Hands off Russia campaign and the Council of Action. Reg Glover, who was then in the ILP recalled the large number of well attended meetings that took place in those years, and the feeling in the younger members of the ILP, which he shared, that revolution was imminent. Certainly, in this period it cannot be referred to as "A haven for dissenting radicals from the superior classes."⁽⁹¹⁾

Much of the work that the ILP did was specifically its own work, aimed at increasing membership, but it also contained people like Ellen Hughes, George Hodgkinson, J.T. Tyson, and George Morris who were active in the Labour Party as well. The elections of December 1918, when Labour put forward its first parliamentary candidate in the city, and polled over 10,000 votes was a tremendous boost to the Party, and shortly afterwards, in 1919, a man called Fothergill was appointed as the Party's first agent and full-time secretary.

Nevertheless, the Labour Party's presence was primarily electoral. In terms of day to day activity the other political parties were more noticeable. The only political advertisement in the Trades Council Report of 1920 was not for the Labour Party but for the ILP. One of the reasons Bert Cresswell joined the CP was because "The Labour Party seemed very tame and had no Individual Membership Section. If it had I never heard of it for several years."⁽⁹²⁾ Presumably this was one of the functions of Fothergill, but he did not remain in the post for very long. Even in the electoral field there was some confusion. In the early post-war years, the Labour Party tended to take a very cautious approach to adopting

candidates in the local elections, and this led to a number of individuals attacking the Party and standing as Independent Labour. This happened to Alice Arnold in 1919, J.T. Tyson in 1920, and George Morris in 1921.

The elections of 1919, the first in the city for six years, were of great importance to the labour movement, but found it divided in several different ways. The split over the candidature of Bannington in the General Election was still there, and this led to two people standing for the NFDDSS. Surprisingly, the Co-op decided for the first time to intervene and put up three candidates. This was after consultation with the Labour Party, and it was agreed that the two bodies would co-operate in their campaigns. For reasons that can only be guessed at, Alice Arnold refused to accept this, and stood against the Co-op candidate in Swanswell, and won the seat. Compared with 1913, the Labour Party put up more candidates, but still left two seats uncontested.

The results surprised and delighted the Labour Party. Including Alice Arnold, they won six of the ten seats that were contested, and the NFDDSS won one. Moreover, Councillor George Pilkington, originally elected as a Liberal, switched to the Labour Party. Givens' remark, made about the General Election, that all other parties were on one side, and Labour on the other, in a straight fight between capital and labour, came near to being true in the local elections as well. The reporter for the Coventry Graphic complained indignantly

"In Swanswell and Hillfields wards - I cannot speak of others - there was an open alliance between the Liberal and Tory parties, and I fancy this had a tendency to increase the Labour vote. After all, we as Englishmen, like fair play, and although I hold no brief for the Labour Candidates I do not think this is altogether playing the game." (93)

Indeed there had been a dramatic change in the political line-up at the

elections. Instead of the two main parties fighting it out with Labour sneaking a few seats, the Tories and Liberals all but disappeared, to be replaced by a single candidate for each seat called a Business candidate or an Independent. The only place where this arrangement was not made was in Stoke, where Ellen Hughes swept in for Labour with a majority of nearly a thousand over the Liberal who just finished ahead of the Conservative. (Apparently her slogan of 'Hughes your Lady Friend' was unbeatable.)⁽⁹⁴⁾ Thereafter, an electoral alliance existed in all wards between the Liberal and Conservatives.

Subsequent elections were a sad disappointment for Labour. In 1920 they won three seats, none in 1921, one in 1922 and two in 1923. Thus only between 1919 and 1922 were there more than a tiny number of Labour Councillors. There were a number of reasons why Labour did poorly after 1919, but part of the explanation was poor organisation. The small Labour group on the Council was not, fact, a group, and did not meet as a group.⁽⁹⁵⁾ The electoral organisation was poor, and the decline of the ILP reduced the number of activists.

Reg Glover was on the left-wing of the ILP and saw the split in that body as being between the young members anxious for revolution and the older more conservative group. As far as he was concerned, the decision of the ILP not to join the CP dealt it a shattering blow as the young activists left. This internal struggle in the ILP meant that the development of the Labour Party was held up. ILPers were not the only members of the Labour Party, there was also a small but influential group of ex-SDF or BSP members, principally A.E. Mabbs, President of the Trades Council for a number of years, and then President of the Labour Party, J.T. Tyson,

secretary of the Labour Party and the Trades Council, and W.A. Binks, who later became a Labour Councillor. Although they did not act as a group, they were not well thought of by the ILP and Hodgkinson saw their influence as one of the reasons for holding back the development of the Party.

Things drifted until the spring of 1923, when Hodgkinson decided to stand for the post of secretary:

"My candidature was strongly supported by the members of the Coventry Branch of the ILP and delegates from the organisation to the General Management Committee were whipped up to attend the next meeting. The Coventry Labour Party was little more than a side show, and uneasy partner in an organisation which embraced the activities of the industrial movement under the wing of the Trades Council and the Tenants Defence League. The ILP took the initiative to divorce the Labour Party from the local Triple Alliance. A motion to that effect was carried at the Annual Meeting and the Coventry Labour Party became a separate entity. In that way the Party, as we know it today, was born and at the same meeting I was appointed secretary of the newly constituted body." (96)

This is a little inaccurate. The Labour Party was already, in theory at least, a separate entity. Since 1918 it had sent delegates in its own right to the Labour Party Conference, had its own officers and constitution and produced its own Annual Report. If it was the junior partner of the Trades Council it was because that was what most of its members wanted. The ILP containing a high proportion of activists, was in a position to stimulate the Labour Party, but up to 1923 had not seen fit to do so. The inability to match the CP as a viable left-wing body in its own right may well have been the reason for the ILP decision to be more active in the Labour Party. Soon after Hodgkinson became the full-time agent of the Party in September 1923 the ILP was able to strengthen its influence with the replacement of Mabbs as Party Chairman.

Nevertheless, the establishment of Hodgkinson as a full-time worker

for the Labour Party, and the separating of the jobs of secretary of the Party the secretary of the Trades Council was a turning point in terms of local organisation. The Furnishing Trades Federation put up some money to pay for the secretary/agent, and he was able to organise the election campaign that produced the first Labour MP for Coventry, in December 1923. Coming less than two months after the defeat in the local elections, this was a major victory, gained because the Liberals and Conservatives could not sustain their electoral alliance at a General Election. As a result, the two candidates came within 10 votes of each other, and Purcell won by a majority of 620 votes, polling over 16,000 votes, about the same number of votes that Williams had got in 1922. Equally important was the fact that an active secretary enabled the Labour Party to build up individual membership, and in September 1925, it clocked up a thousand members.⁽⁹⁷⁾ A circular issued at this time referred to "The Monthly Bulletin of Information, which may lead up to the issue of a Local Weekly Paper."⁽⁹⁸⁾ The weekly paper did not emerge, but the bulletin came out in 1926.

The ILP may have breathed some life into the Labour Party, but at a heavy cost to itself. With the development of ward Labour Parties, Women's Organisations, and local and City public meetings, the scope for the activity of the ILP declined. Although membership fees collected are not a perfect guide, the fees dropped so substantially in the early 1920s that it is very likely that there was a large decline in membership. In 1920, the fees for the year stood at over £13, and this fell to something over £3 in 1923, and although they recovered somewhat in the later 1920s, they never went above £8.⁽⁹⁹⁾ Although it survived for many years, and even split from the Labour Party in the 1930s, its main impact was to

try to push the Labour Party to the left. Here it was more successful in General elections than local, and the Coventry Party quickly picked up the tradition of selecting left-wingers for parliamentary candidates. Locally, however, the only Labour candidates that could do well in the 1920s were the right-wing Councillors.

When the CP showed more interest in working with and in the Labour Party from 1923 onwards, it received support from the ILP. Bert Cresswell was accepted as a semi-official candidate in the local elections in 1923, and given active support as a Labour candidate in 1924, when he polled more votes than any other Labour candidate. In the same year, George Kingston, also a Communist, stood as a Labour candidate. This was in defiance of the decision of the Labour Party Conference in October 1924 that no Communist could be a Labour Party candidate in local or national elections, or be individual members of the Labour Party. The Coventry Party continued to defy this last decision for another year, by nominating Cresswell as delegate to the Conference in 1924 and 1925, but he was not accepted as eligible. At the 1925 Conference, it was decided that Communists were not eligible for individual membership, and furthermore, that existing members who were in the Communist Party would have to leave. Hodgkinson went to the Conference as the Coventry delegate mandated to vote against the proposals, but their acceptance meant the end of Communist involvement in the local Labour Party. Had the Communists been more involved in the early years (though this would have been made difficult by the lack of Labour organisation) this decision might have had a greater impact, and produced a greater response.

Although the Coventry Labour Party was slow at building up the Individual Membership Section its underlying strength throughout its existence

was its affiliation from the local trade unions. The Coventry Labour Representation Committee had eleven trade union branches with 1,133 members affiliated to it in its first year in 1902, and this number grew at a modest rate throughout the next two decades.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ In 1914 it had 36 affiliations amounting to 10,500 members, and in 1919 there were 42 affiliated branches, though at the same time there were 78 union branches affiliated to the Trades Council.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ The new constitution of 1918 increased the power of the unions in both the local and national parties, but in fact, the unions already had a predominant position in the Labour Party before 1918. However, the establishment of an Individual Membership Section, while it left power with the unions, encouraged a new type of leadership. Outside a fairly narrow range of trade issues, the political objectives of the local trade union movement tended to be vague, and the individual members were able to put flesh on the bones of local policy. It was their effort and ability which determined the quality of the local Labour Party and built the organisation needed to win seats. Nevertheless the organic link with the trade unions meant that as the unions grew, the Labour vote grew, and the Labour Party consolidated itself as the party of the whole of organised labour. As we have seen, attempts by the Communist Party to win the leadership of organised labour came unstuck except in those areas where the trade unions and Labour had not bothered to organise, particularly among the unemployed. Although the Labour Party was developing and going through periods of strain in the early 1920s there was never any time when the link between the unions and the party seemed in danger. In February 1919, T.J. Harris, one of the stalwarts of the Labour Party, wrote to the Midland Daily Telegraph to severely criticise⁽¹⁰²⁾ the CEJC for holding a strike ballot over new working conditions, and although

this no doubt made him unpopular in some quarters, there was no suggestion of a rift developing between the unions and the Labour Party on the issue, or that Harris should be disciplined by the Party. It had already been clearly established that at local level the unions and their organisations decided industrial affairs without reference to the Labour Party, while the Party decided political affairs with increasingly less reference to the unions, despite the considerable overlap of personnel between the two wings of the movement. The Labour Party Constitution increased union influence in the Party in theory, but not necessarily in practice. Other potentially rival influences were either weakened, like the ILP, or excluded like the CP.

However, the individual membership section encouraged the growth of people committed to the Party first, and unions second, and they were the ones who worked out the politics and strategies at local level. They could lead the big unions whose votes dominated the Party, and achieve a dominant position through the acquiescence of these unions.

The concept of two wings for the movement requiring two sorts of organisation was one that dated from the very first days of the Labour Party. The political groups like the ILP and the CP did not challenge this division but hoped to be able to link the two by providing a coherent political leadership. But in fact neither were able to meet the challenges posed by the political upheavals of the period. The CP began life as a group of industrial militants, and was unable to create a significant political grouping, while the ILP lost many of its industrial militants and began to concentrate almost exclusively on national and local electoral struggles. One group became an appendage to the trade union movement and liable to limit its activities in an economist way, the other, through

the Labour Party, gained some degree of autonomy from the unions, but only at the expense of concentrating on a narrow municipal field, and leaving the major priorities to be decided elsewhere.

These divisions on the left and the consolidation of the Labour Party did not mark any break from the political situation before or during the war. Coventry Labour Party's basic aim had always been to complement trade union activity by improving local social services. In 1916, the Annual Report had stated

"The efforts of Labour in the past have centred around wages, hours of labour, and conditions of employment. More and more are these tending to be controlled by political considerations, and therefore the policy of a political Labour Party must be directed to the raising of the economic status, to establishing advanced educational facilities, to ensuring security of employment whilst in health and adequate maintenance during ill-health and old age, combined with a perfect freedom to each individual worker." (103)

Although coloured by war-time conditions, this general statement of aims was as true for the 1920s as it was for the time it was written. The difference was that the Labour Party in the 1920s had consolidated its position, and was just a little nearer the implementation of these aims. The establishment of an individual membership, a process that began in 1924 was essential for the furtherance of these aims, but the consolidation had come about by default. The upheavals of the war and the post-war strikes, the development of the shop stewards movement, the spread of revolutionary ideas, and the Russian Revolution had failed to transform the organisations of the labour movement, though they had certainly left their mark. As a result the reformist trend in the labour movement emerged from the crucial post-war years stronger than ever, while the revolutionary wing of the movement suffered defeats and political isolation. The war and the post-war years brought many new people into the labour

movement, and brought many people in the labour movement into struggle and conflict for the first time and this led to a general understanding among more and more people that social change was needed, and that the Labour Party was the vehicle for change.

The years of turmoil after the war not only saw the gradual emergence of the Labour Party and the failure of the CP to escape from its isolation for more than a short period, but led to a reaction against industrial and political unrest. Both the Labour Party and the CP went into decline after 1922, but Labour's position as the only mass party of the working class ensured that it would at some point recover. The CP could not rely on this.

FOOTNOTES

Post-war Political Struggles

1. B.B. Gilbert, British Social Policy 1914-1939, (1970) pp.51/97.
2. J.J. Astor et al., The Third Winter of Unemployment, (1923).
3. Foleshill Union Board of Guardians, (FUBG) Minutes, 10th November 1920.
4. M.D.T. 29th September 1920.
5. The Communist, 30th September 1920.
6. The Communist, 7th October 1920.
7. " " 28th October 1920.
8. M.D.T. 5th October 1920.
9. " 8th September 1921.
10. AEU District Committee Minutes, 6th March 1922. Maddison was active as a shop steward in the Workers Committee movement during the war. He was a supporter of the CP for a time in the early 1920s, but gradually gave up a left-wing stance. He was a member of the AEU District Committee for many years in the 1920s and 1930s.
11. M.D.T. 1st April 1922.
12. " 31st March 1922.
13. " 3rd April 1922.
14. " 4th April 1922.
15. ibid.
16. Coventry Union Board of Guardians, (CUBG) Minutes, 21st September 1921, and FUBG Minutes, 19th September 1921.
- 17.
18. CUBG Minutes, 9th February 1921.
19. M.D.T. 17th November 1921.
20. CUBG Minutes, 27th October 1920.
21. " " 12th January 1921.
22. ibid.

23. ibid.
24. CUBG Minutes 21st September 1921.
25. " " 26th January 1921.
26. " " 4th May 1921.
27. FUGB Minutes 14th January 1920.
28. M.D.T. 4th April 1922, and Out of Work, Vol. 1, No. 29.
29. ibid., and Wal Hannington, Unemployed Struggles, 1919-1936, (1936), p.66.
30. M.D.T. 5th April 1922.
31. M.D.T. 17th January 1921.
32. " 22nd June 1922. These were the peak proportions.
33. " 9th June 1922.
34. " 17th August 1922.
35. " 28th September 1922.
36. FUGB Minutes, 12th October 1921.
37. M.D.T. 12th April 1922.
38. FUGB Minutes, 21st December 1921.
39. " " 27th April 1922.
40. M.D.T. 14th September 1921.
41. M.D.T. 19th September, 28th September, and 7th October 1921. Also FUGB Minutes, 14th September and 19th September 1921.
42. CUBG Minutes, 27th December 1922. He appears to have returned to London as soon as he could.
43. CUBG Minutes, 15th November 1922.
44. ibid.
45. M.D.T. 22nd November 1922.
46. CUBG Minutes 13th December 1922.
47. Hannington, op.cit. pp.99/104. Also CUBG Minutes, 7th February 1923, and M.D.T. 3rd February 1923.
48. CUBG Minutes, 21st February 1923.

49. CUBG Minutes, 29th November 1922.
50. " " 7th February 1923.
51. M.T.D. 5th January 1923.
52. CUBG Minutes, 10th January 1923.
53. " " 16th May 1923.
54. Workers Weekly, 10th February 1923.
55. Out of Work, Vol. I No. 55 (April 1923).
56. The Socialist, 13th May 1920.
57. Cab., PRO, GT 24 Reports on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 19th August 1920.
58. The Socialist, 7th October 1920.
59. Walter Kendall, The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-1921, (1969) pp.275/6, and M.D.T. 3rd June 1921.
60. Cab., PRO GT 24 Reports, 28th May and 18th June 1919.
61. ibid, 23rd October 1919.
62. M.D.T. 30th September 1920.
63. Cab., PRO GT 24, Reports, 13th November 1918.
64. ibid, 21st October 1920.
65. M.D.T. 30th November 1920.
66. Cab., PRO GT 24 Reports, 22nd April 1920.
67. ibid, 14th May 1919.
68. M.D.T. 16th August 1920.
69. M.D.T. 23rd August 1920.
70. Cab., PRO GT 24 Reports, 28th October 1920.
71. Solidarity December 1920.
72. Cab., PRO GT 24 Reports, 25th November 1920, and 9th February 1922.
73. ibid, 7th October 1920.
74. Yates, op.cit, pp.72/73.
75. Cab., PRO GT 24 Reports, 25th August 1921.

76. ibid, 21st April 1921.
77. ibid, 26th January 1922. The report claimed that CP membership had fallen from 130 to 54, in six months, but the next report, on 9th February, commented on its growing strength.
78. ibid, 9th February 1922.
79. M.D.T. 4th April 1922.
80. " 25th May 1922.
81. Cab. PRO GT 24 Reports, 10th August 1922.
82. The Communist, 14th January 1922.
83. Cab., PRO GT 24 Reports, 15th December 1921.
84. ibid, 22nd December 1921.
85. The Communist, 25th March 1922. In fact Leckie, one of the Coventry delegates, spoke against the amendment which contained these sentiments.
86. L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party, (1966) p.115.
87. M.D.T. 2nd November 1921.
88. Ross McKibbin, The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910-1924 (Oxford) 1974, p.33.
89. Coventry Trades Council, Annual Report, 1919.
90. McKibbin, op.cit. p.105, also Yates, op.cit. pp.57/60.
91. Interview with Reg Glover. McKibbin, op.cit. 244.
92. Coventry Socialist and Labour Movement Reminiscences.
93. Coventry Graphic, 7th November 1919.
94. Interview with Charles and Charlotte Wilson.
95. Interview with George Hodgkinson.
96. Hodgkinson, op.cit. p.80.
97. The Labour Organiser, No. 57 September 1925.
98. ibid.
99. Independent Labour Party, Annual Congress Reports, 1920-1929.
100. Yates, op.cit. pp. 25/26.
101. Coventry Labour Party, Annual Report, 1915.
102. M.D.T. 11th February 1919.
103. Coventry Labour Party, Annual Report, 1916.

CHAPTER FOUR

PART I

Post-war Industrial Struggles

During the war, craft unions had relaxed their control over workshop conditions and the nature of production. When the war was over, they sought to regain control, not by returning to pre-war agreements but by signing new agreements that could cover the many contentious issues that existed. Coventry unions rejected the old, inadequate agreements, and sought to use their newly-acquired strength to extend bargaining rights, and in particular, protect against unemployment.

The war had done away with the old rates of payments, and a chaotic earnings system existed. Some uniformity had to be reintroduced. The economic pressures on employers, however, particularly severe in the motor engineering industry, determined employers to go on the offensive, to intensify the attacks on craft strength that had taken place during the war.

The years 1918-1922 therefore saw a crucial trial of strength between the two sides, culminating in the lock-out of 1922. The result of this dispute was a key factor in shaping the fortunes of the trade union movement in Coventry for the rest of the inter-war period. It is dealt with in detail in the second part of this chapter. The first part looks at the build-up to the lock-out, and examines the workshop issues that made the "managerial functions dispute" so important to both sides.

I After the War

A number of munitions factories closed down. These included several shell and filling factories, the Coventry Ordnance Works, and the Hotchkiss. In most cases however, factories returned to pre-war occupations, some quickly, and some slowly. A number were able to adjust to peace time easily, such as Rover and Siddeley, while others found the process very difficult. One historian wrote,

"The end of the war found an industry ill-prepared for bad times. Such plant as had survived was unbalanced, and although engine shops had expanded, the coach-building shops, which had handled the car bodies, had almost ceased to exist. There were far too many uneconomic firms, and during the 1920s the car industry was forced to streamline itself under the twofold impact of the slump and fierce competition." (1)

This is a general picture, and there were individual companies that were able to go against the trend. Although a number of companies, all small ones, went out of existence in the early 1920s in Coventry, 12 companies moved into car production for the first time, and a number were able to flourish, particularly the Alvis.⁽²⁾ The Siddeley-Deasy Company claimed that it made the first post-war car in Britain, and as it was successful and the company wished to expand, it joined Armstrong-Whitworth in 1919 to form Armstrong-Siddeley. The company produced mainly luxury cars, and was able to offset the slump in car sales in the 1920s by its aero-engine work, and its main Parkside works in Coventry had a night shift as well as a day shift throughout the 1920s.⁽³⁾

Trade was reasonable between 1919 and mid 1920, but every car company was hit by a sharp and sudden slump in the autumn of 1920, and car sales generally were depressed for several years. Even the successful companies put workers on short time and closed down production for short periods,

while the less successful ones put their workers out of work indefinitely. Car makers tried to keep up demand by reducing prices. In January 1921 the Morris Cowley was selling at £525, but after a series of cuts this figure was down to £255 by October 1922.⁽⁴⁾ Other car manufacturers were forced to follow suit, though few could make as big cuts as Morris. The new Rover Eight was priced at £230 in 1919 when it was first produced, and rose to £300 in 1920. Thereafter a number of cuts had to be imposed, and in 1924 it was selling at £145.⁽⁵⁾

This slashing of prices did something to restore sales, but could only be temporary unless wholesale economies could be introduced. Employers had to tackle the high costs of labour in particular. This was done in two ways. The first, and immediate way was to impose wage reductions, the second was to reorganise the workplace by installing new machine tools that could produce cheaply on a large scale when the market picked up.

The recession in Coventry between 1920-1922 was particularly acute. Most of the car companies in the city concentrated on the production of expensive quality cars, with high labour costs and high prices. When sales of these fell companies had to make particularly severe efforts to adapt to the new small car market of the late 1920s. It was generally believed that Coventry was not best suited for the production of small cars. When Morris first moved into the city, in purchasing the body-work company Hollick and Pratt in January 1923, it was to take over short runs on specialised body production:

"An underlying cause of this development has been that Coventry labour costs and practices have militated against the area as a centre for the mass production of bodies. Accordingly, body production in this area has tended more and more to be restricted to types of product where Coventry craftsmanship can be relatively economic." (6)

After 1920, employers needed to reorganise the workplace whether producing

small or large cars, and this inevitably led to an attack on the unions.

II Unions Push for Better Conditions

Trade unions in Coventry continued to grow immediately after the war. The WU was the largest in the city by 1918 and it continued to grow rapidly. In 1918 contributions from the Coventry branches totalled £11,494 while in 1921 total contributions for the year came to £33,765, without there having been an increase in union dues in the period.⁽⁷⁾ However, the figures include the state unemployment benefit. But the financial reports also pointed to the unions downfall. In 1918 there is no record of any union unemployment benefit, and the total disputes benefit for the year was £5 13s 4d. In 1921, dispute benefit came to £176 10s 9d, and union out-of-work benefit to £7,724. In addition, a further £16,023 was paid out as part of the state unemployment benefit scheme.⁽⁷⁾ Thus over two-thirds of total income was going on unemployment payments. The union had a generous scheme, and the figures for 1921 may reflect the fact that out-of-work members were remaining in the union until they had exhausted their benefit entitlement. In any event, 1922 was just as bad a year, and membership of the union melted away throughout the Midlands. The historian of the union estimated that membership declined by 90% in the early 1920s.⁽⁸⁾

The ASE ended the war with about 5,000 members, while the AST claimed about 6,000.⁽⁹⁾ In mid-1920 when the ASE, AST, SEM and UMWA amalgamated the Coventry membership of the new AEU was 13,115.⁽¹⁰⁾ Further membership figures for the united body were not given until March 1921, when they were about 12,300.⁽¹¹⁾ The March 1921 figures also showed that of over 12,000

members, nearly 4,000 were out of work that month, and this led to a further loss of members in the period before the lock-out in 1922. By the end of 1921, membership stood at 11,314, representing a fall of a thousand in nine months. Over the period of the first half of the decade, the AEU suffered almost as much as the WU, but in the case of the AEU the bulk of the membership left as a result of the 1922 lock-out.

The WU's women members were in a particularly difficult position after the war. National agreements had been reached to ensure that women would leave the factories and the ASE and other unions were active in policing this agreement. Although some did stay on, most left the engineering trades quickly. In January 1919 it was reported that there were 3,000 women drawing unemployment benefit in the city, and with engineering closed to them, they had to fall back on a narrow range of female work, which included domestic work. Alice Arnold was the women's organiser for the WU and was against any form of domestic service involving living in;

"The assurance of good wages, she said, good conditions and liberty was essential before girls would re-enter service. If they were indoor servants they could not have their liberty, but were employed from early morning till late at night, and their work was never finished. The only solution of the servant problem was the eight hour shifts, and a great improvement in pay, food and conditions of work, whilst the absolute abolition of registry offices and control by the Labour Exchange were changes that had got to be made." (12)

This attempt to bring trade unionism and factory conditions into service was not surprisingly a failure, but Alice Arnold's remarks produced a flood of letters on the issue of domestic servants and their rights, and revealed even in a working class city like Coventry strong opinions from a number of people who felt that servants' rights were few and far between. One letter from "Householder" complained

"The majority of domestic helps have their homes outside Coventry. Why should they want every evening off? Miss Arnold must know that parading the streets is not conducive to good morals." (13)

One woman, herself an ex-domestic servant declared

"There have never been such high wages nor better conditions offered to servants than today, but insolent letters from lower class maids will not improve matters." (14)

Alice Arnold could not rely on support from most male trade unionists who felt that a woman's place was in the home.

Sir Alfred Herbert employed women in his machine tool factories and was happy to carry on employing them after the war. "It is well to face the true facts," he wrote, "Owing to fundamental differences in mentality it is perfectly certain that, save in the most exceptional instances, women cannot become skilled mechanics." He accepted the popular view that they were particularly equipped to do repetitive work:

"She is content to go on working on the same job so long as the conditions are favourable, and her earnings reasonable, with the knowledge that her work is not her life, and with the feeling that she is merely spending her time usefully until marriage brings her the fulfilment of her life." (15)

This attitude was the best that women could hope for from employers, and it fitted in neatly with their need for cheap and docile unskilled labour.

Even before the sudden slump in 1920, Coventry unions were concerned about the effect of unemployment on union members. In 1919 unemployment fluctuated, and although it never reached a high level for long it was the first real unemployment seen in the city for five years. Consequently, restrictions on overtime and a reduction of the working week figured prominently in the claims the unions put to the employers. These were part of a package that the unions adopted to meet post-war conditions. The impetus for trying to negotiate a new local agreement came from the ASE,

which submitted a claim to the CEJC, and which were accepted by that body with a few changes, in December 1918. They were then put to the employers.

The last local agreement covering working conditions had been in 1910, and the unions particularly disliked the amount of overtime, fifteen hours per week, which it allowed. The new proposed agreement stated that there would be no overtime worked automatically on production work. It might be acceptable on non-production work, provided that the CEJC had agreed to it. On hours, the unions called for a reduction from 53 hours a week to 40. They wanted improvements in piece work rates, and also a move away from individual negotiations. Instead a Pricing Committee of employers and union representatives was proposed. The initiative for this came from the ASE, which felt that skilled non-production workers had lost ground during the war, as Givens explained; they wanted

"A method of avoiding the abnormal earnings of certain individuals who are on goodpaying productive jobs as against the skilled worker who during the war has been on tools, jigs, etc, at really a nominal wage. Our proposal made an attempt to equalise the earnings of all individuals by suggesting a collective system rather than an individual system of piece-work." (16)

Also proposed were negotiations over the number and wages of apprentices, the controlling of new machines, a new holiday arrangement, and a dismissal and disputes procedure.

In negotiating this ambitious claim with the CDEEA, the CEJC was hampered by three factors. The first was the national negotiations on hours reductions; the second was the need for swift action in banning overtime that some unionists wanted; the third was the refusal of some unions to allow the CEJC to push negotiations to the extent that it would call industrial action over them. The first meeting with the CDEEA made

no progress as the national negotiations on hours were still in progress, and the local employers would not therefore discuss the claim. At the beginning of 1919, the national agreement was signed reducing hours to 47 a week. This provoked strikes for the 40 hour week in Scotland and Belfast. There was no strike action taken in Coventry, but the unions supported the strikers, and the Coventry District Committee of the ASE convened a Midlands Conference of the union, and put a number of militant motions to it, including one that stated

"That we call upon the Government to negotiate directly with the Committees now out, as we entirely repudiate the E.C. as the responsible leaders of the Society." (17)

Another called for a strike, but was not put to the Conference, which anyway met after the strikes in the north were called off.

The national settlement on hours killed off the local talks on the issue, even though union officials attacked the way it was implemented. Givens complained that day workers got a reduction in hours without loss of pay, but that

"The piece worker, however, had no such advantage, for it he wanted to earn 53 hours wages in 47 hours he had to crowd six hours extra work into the shortened week. As, during the war, he had been working at top speed it was difficult to see that the piece worker could possibly reap any monetary advantage from the new system." (18)

Unions also claimed that employers were tightening up on discipline when they reduced hours, and cutting out tea breaks, stopping smoking, and locking out late comers. At a local conference the employers made no concessions, and the grievance was added to the CEJC's list.

Before the second meeting with the CDEEA on working conditions, the ASE got the CEJC to support a ban on overtime to deal with the unemployment problem. Unemployment was not acute at the time, and it gave the employers an opportunity to refuse to discuss the union claim in detail until the ban

was called off. The employers claimed that the unions were unilaterally ending the 1910 agreement. Thus a second and a third meeting between the two sides made no progress. A mass meeting in February 1919 called by the CEJC agreed to have a ballot for strike action, and this prompted the employers to agree to another meeting.

At this fourth meeting, the employers made concessions concerning the status of the CEJC. It was recognised as a local negotiating body, and it was agreed to hold regular monthly meetings between the two sides.⁽¹⁹⁾ As the WU had been allowed to join the CEJC it appeared to have reestablished itself as a leadership of a united trade union movement, but this was mere appearance. The employers refused to negotiate on the working conditions document; the CEJC responded by calling for a strike ballot, and ran into trouble with some of its constituents.

The issues at stake were many and complicated, and this provoked T.J. Harris to write to the local newspaper complaining that

"It is beyond contention that the vast mass of their constituents are entirely ignorant of what has transpired, or have been unable to express with any clarity their views on the various items which figure in the programme." ⁽²⁰⁾

The ballot "suffers from a multiplicity of details," and sought "to force us to put up a fight locally for that which must be a matter for national settlement." AST officials, chief of which was John Chater, the senior E.C. delegate for the area, said that only its E.C. could call a strike ballot, and that it would not do so over a document that contained a 40 hour demand, as the union had signed the 47 hour agreement. Other pressure must have been put on the CEJC, for its two leaders, Givens of the ASE and Beswick of SEMS announced only a few days after the ballot decision had been taken, that it was suspended and that items of a national character

would not be pursued locally.⁽²¹⁾ This climbdown showed that industrial action was outside the scope of the CECJ. The claim was pursued to Central Conference, which prevented any further action on it.

The formation of the AEU out of the largest craft unions in the city struck a lasting blow at the CEJC, as it meant that one union dominated the engineering industry, particularly with the decline of the WU. Although the CEJC carried on with regular meetings with the CDEEA, up to the time of the lock-out, they were not fruitful and there was "Severe criticism of the abortive nature of these conferences" by the AEU.⁽²²⁾ The application of the ban on overtime soured the relations with the employers and in the two years before the lock-out no less than 8 references went from Coventry to Central Conference, and none of them were settled. With no progress being made on negotiations at local level, the CEJC again declined in importance.

III The Overtime Ban

The ban on overtime in Coventry lasted from the beginning of 1919 to the lock-out in 1922. It had a varying effect on management, as trade was slack for much of the period, but excessive overtime had been a tradition in the spring of each year, and for a few months the ban threatened sales. Its prolonged application was a strong incentive to employers to seize the opportunity of the lock-out to heavily defeat the unions. The AEU and other unions did permit some overtime, as was reported to a meeting of District Committees in the division;

"Written application from the firms were however considered and if permission was granted the members were instructed that before any overtime was worked the written permission had to be posted in the shops." (23)

Most of this work involved maintenance, but generally the unions took the view that as long as they had members out of work, there was a right to take unilateral action to stop overtime.

The AEU was particularly determined, at least at the level of the District Committee, to enforce the ban. It encountered opposition, however, not only from employers, but also from its own members and those of other unions. In a few cases it directly punished erring members. Thus the AEU DC minute book recorded in July 1920:

"That Brother Hopkins be fined £3 for working consistent Overtime contrary to instructions, and for using unpardonable language about our officials on receipt of his summons to D.C." (24)

The ASE DC minutes also record several criticisms of some of the union officials who sat on the CEJC. These included a complaint at the chaos that a lack of a central authority in the administration of the ban was producing, another indication that the powers of the CEJC were waning.

In the autumn of 1920, when mass unemployment developed swiftly, the unions began to consider further action against the loss of jobs. In September the CEJC presented four proposals to the employers' associations:

- "a. That a general temporary reduction of hours should take place.
- b. That where firms have sufficient volume of work, 2 short shifts shall be run.
- c. That consideration be given by a Joint Committee to special departments where this is not possible, and
- d. That no outside labour shall be brought into the City without the consent of the Joint Sub-Committee." (25)

The employers rejected these as being impractical.

A month later, the AEU DC had a special meeting to discuss unemployment, and it was decided to try to reach a work-sharing arrangement with the other unions, receive delegates from the unemployed committee, call

on the City Council to provide jobs, impose a levy for unemployed members, and call for more trade with the Soviet Union. The most important decision was

"That this D.C. instructs the Secretary to inform the Employers Association, that commencing Monday 1st November 1920 our members will be instructed to work only 5 days per week of seven hours each day until such time as the Employers can show that the volume of work in the city is sufficient to warrant an extension of these hours, without causing further unemployment."
(26)

However, the DC found that its proposal was not acceptable to the membership. At an aggregate meeting, it was agreed to have a levy of 2/6d per member, but the proposal for a unilateral 35 hour week was referred back by a small majority.⁽²⁷⁾ At a second aggregate meeting, the DC again brought the proposal forward, but it was again defeated, this time by a motion that the issue be put to a ballot. The ballot showed 549 members in favour of the proposal, and 2260 against, with less than a quarter of the membership voting.⁽²⁸⁾ Members clearly were not prepared to lose over a quarter of their wages in order to create more jobs. In fact, the DC found it more difficult to get members to ban overtime when there were thousands out of work. Many of those in work suffered periods of short time working, and wanted to get their wages back once the opportunity appeared. As a result, in 1921 the number of exhortations about sticking to the ban from the DC increased, but the number of people being disciplined was reduced, despite complaints from the unemployed committee and others, that some factories were working overtime.

IV The Employers' Attack

Soon after the war, the CEJC began a campaign for higher piece work prices, and for some rationalisation of the many piece work schemes in operation in the city. Some increases were achieved in 1919, but an application for the merging of all war bonuses into the district rate and a 15/- increase was rejected at a local conference. This went to Central Conference, and again nothing became of it. The ASE DC complained that

"It appears that all questions of wages and conditions have been taken entirely out of the hands of Local District Committees and that the EC will probably be able to arrive at a settlement of the many questions now in their hands in the dim and distant future." (29)

There were a couple of small wage increases in the first half of 1920, and this kept the heat out of the wages issue. In the end of the year, however, movement began again, with this time the initiative coming from the employers. The situation changed with startling rapidity. In December 1920 the CDEEA argued for a national wage reduction by producing evidence of the slump in Coventry. A resolution sent to the Engineering Employers' Federation spelt it out:

- a. At the present time out of 46 members only 5 firms are at present actually working full time with their full complement of workpeople, whereas prior to the 1st August 1920 42 firms were working full time with their full complement of workpeople in each instance.
- b. In consequence of the altered position of the engineering trade 41 members have made reductions in the numbers of their workpeople varying between 10% and 75% as compared with their employees at the 1st November 1919.
- c. 41 firms are now working short time in their works, that is to say, 2/3 days per week with reduced numbers of employees and in certain instances the condition of affairs amounts to a complete shut down, only a nucleus being retained which is engaged either manufacturing to stock without prospect of orders or on maintenance and repairs...

This was at a time when unemployment was under 7,000 - it kept rising to

about 12,000 in the next few months. The association drew the obvious conclusion from this picture.

"This Association is of opinion that the engineering industry in Coventry is unable to carry any further increase in wages and that the question of a reduction in wages should be earnestly considered by the Federation." (30)

A month later, the association returned to this theme, though more vigorously. Another resolution was sent to London:

"That the Federation be strongly urged to take immediate and definite action in the matter of reduction of piece-work prices, or otherwise to allow the Coventry Association to commence negotiations with the Unions in regard to the wages question.

It was pointed out that the present was the most opportune time possible for an adjustment of wages and that if the Federation cannot or will not advise members as to the policy to be followed, members will be found to take matters into their own hands." (31)

In fact, by this time, Coventry employers had already taken matters into their own hands. Although national agreements on a reduction did not get signed until mid-1921, a blizzard of cuts struck the trade unions in the city at the end of 1920, showing the weakness of workplace organisation and splitting the unions in the city once again.

One of the first factories to introduce reductions was English Electric, and it was reported to the AEU that the shop stewards there had agreed on a reduction. The Works Committee was summoned to the DC meeting where they were accused of having "done the dirty work of the management," by taking around the lists of reductions to the men and persuading them to accept. The stewards claimed that the only alternative was dismissal, but this did not satisfy the DC and five stewards had their credentials removed.⁽³²⁾ It was an inauspicious start to a defensive campaign.

It was at this point, when the trade unions were facing the first serious attack from employers since before the war, that the AEU decided to leave the CEJC, a decision supported by a crowded aggregate meeting. The minutes of the meeting do not make it clear what the reason was for leaving, but it is likely that it was a combination of a feeling that the CEJC was not prosecuting the struggle against unemployment or reductions energetically enough with a feeling that now that there was one major union for engineering workers there was no point in the CEJC which it had just left.

The AEU was particularly concerned by the lack of resistance given in many factories, though where it was offered it was countered by threats to close the works down. It was also concerned with the way its members co-operated in applying the reductions, particularly the foremen and chargehands. One of the chargehands from the Hillman machine shop, called before the DC to give evidence reported

"The Foremen and chargehands had been called into the office and told that a reduction of prices had got to take place covering the whole town and they were requested to find out what reductions could be obtained. Some of the foremen and chargehands had gone round their section with a list, but he did not do this but simply told the men individually when they were wanted in the office. Some of the men had accepted 10, 15 or 20% reductions and in his opinion these men could afford these reductions." (33)

Thus the size of the reductions to some extent depended on the vigour with which they were pushed by chargehands, and the confidence individual workers had in opposing some or all of them. As a result, the weaknesses of "mutuality" were seen, with no united workplace opposition, but each individual trying to do as well as he could.

Givens reported to the DC in December 1920 and

"Drew attention to the many attacks on the rates and p.w. prices being made by the Employers connected with the Federation; English Electric Co., Coventry Chain Co., New Rover Co., Lea and Francis, Selson Co., Morton and Weaver, and others having all made definite attacks and in some cases our members had accepted the reductions without resistance." (34)

It was agreed to hold an aggregate meeting "To point out to the members the urgent need for Unity of Action on this matter and to secure resistance to the employers' moves." The meeting was well attended, and resolved that no members should accept any reductions. The first major attempt to resist was in the unusual circumstances of the Triumph dispute.

The Triumph Cycle Co. had not been a member of the EEF or the CDEEA during the war, and as a result claimed that it had made an error in 1916 when a $12\frac{1}{2}\%$ war bonus was merged with another. The company claimed that it had done this, but by mistake had carried on paying an additional $12\frac{1}{2}\%$ to some 300 skilled day rate workers. In January 1921, the company noticed its error, and tried to get the unions to accept a $12\frac{1}{2}\%$ cut. When this was refused, the company dismissed all the men and offered re-engagement provided they accepted the reduction. It was thus a lock-out, though the employers' association unblushingly called it a strike. The AEU and the WU were the major unions involved, and they had all of their members out from February 8th. The AEU alone had some 1,600 men participating.

The AEU DC promised the "Utmost resistance possible" as the company had broken procedure and locked men out while negotiations were going on. It was also felt to be highly suspicious that the company had found the error at that particular point in time. The EC of the union agreed to support the dispute, and an aggregate meeting in Coventry unanimously decided to ask the EC to approve a strike ballot for the district "For a

down tools policy to restore the Status Quo at the Triumph Works and resist any further reductions in wages."⁽³⁵⁾ This was turned down, and the DC had to make do with a levy and collections.

It was not a good time for a large dispute like this, and a number of members from the AEU did not come out. There were picket lines and demonstrations, with the CUWC and the newly re-formed Workers Committee getting themselves involved, and in one incident, Bob Orrel, who had been an AST official and had recently been made the ODD for the new Coventry and District Division of the AEU, was attacked on the picket line.⁽³⁶⁾ The biggest blow came when one of the skilled unions, the National Society of Brassworkers and Metal Mechanics decided to accept the reduction and return to work. Their representative told the AEU DC

"The causes of their action was the economic position of their members, the advert re. Ballot not taking place and also the number of AEU members continuing at work."⁽³⁷⁾

The DC met George Morris of the WU and the two bodies agreed to carry on the dispute, but on the same day at a mass meeting of Triumph AEU members, only a minority turned up, and a vote of confidence in the DC was defeated, with a majority of those present refusing to vote.⁽³⁸⁾ The strike had been on for three weeks at this point, and the WU and the AEU DCs met to insist that the dispute was still on, and that members who went back would be expelled. Nevertheless, the numbers returning increased. A report in Solidarity summarised the situation; "More than six unions are concerned, and, as a consequence, scabbing and confusion prevails."⁽³⁹⁾

The Brassworkers and Metal Mechanics went back on 1st March, and a large number of AEU members returned as well. When the DC interviewed them, they claimed it was because the response to the strike had been weak,

and that others had also gone back. On 6th March, the Chairman of the DC complained of "various meetings of the men in certain public houses," presumably to agree to go back, and after discussion and a narrow vote of 11 to 8 it was resolved that

"Recognising the loyalty of the minority of members now in dispute at the Triumph Co. and that their position is seriously jeopardised by the action of the weakened majority, we recommend them to resume work..." (40)

An agreement was reached with the company that allowed for the reduction of $12\frac{1}{2}\%$ for skilled day workers and 3/- a week for unskilled day workers, and the workers returned on 14th March. Prior to the settlement, the employers were claiming that 1,426 men had already gone back.

This was not the end, for the AEU and the WU felt that disciplinary action was called for. In the AEU a complaints sub-committee met and began to interview large numbers of Triumph members. It was initially decided that those members who could show hardship or that they had at least stayed out for several weeks would be fined £3 and in some cases lose six months benefit, while others who had no excuse would be excluded from the union. This would have meant excluding too many, however, and the DC finally decided that those who had worked throughout the dispute plus those whose actions were especially detrimental, totalling about 50 people, were to be excluded, and the rest fined. One of the men singled out for criticism for his role in the strike was John Chater, who was a member of the DC.⁽⁴¹⁾ It is not known how many WU members were disciplined. This union action was strongly objected to by the Triumph management, who claimed that it broke a term of settlement, that there would be no victimisation by either side. In fact, they claimed over 1,000 men were "victimised" by the AEU. The Company took the matter to Central Conference, where the record shows

"Considerable correspondence took place between the Coventry Association, the Federation and the General Council of the AEU and certain interviews took place in regard to the victimization of their members on the part of the District Committee of the AEU." (42)

Eventually the Federation advised the local association that nothing could be done as it was an internal union matter.

The dispute had clearly done the trade union movement in Coventry no good at all, and while it could be argued that the Brassworkers and Metal Mechanics were chiefly to blame in leading the retreat, it was the AEU that suffered the most by adopting a more militant attitude. The comparative strength of the union should not be overlooked, for it appears that most members paid their fines, though a number must have simply left the union. This dispute and others of a more minor nature had its effect on the union membership. The AEU lost some 1,800 members in the year after its formation.

Some members of the DC felt that its attitude of resisting all cuts was unreasonable, and another incident only a month after the end of the Triumph dispute made the same argument. The management at the Daimler proposed reductions, and were opposed by the stewards there who adhered to the DC line. But the management took a ballot of the members, and found a majority in favour of accepting the reductions. The stewards resigned, but other workers came forward to act as unofficial stewards in arranging the reductions.⁽⁴³⁾ Again, they argued that the alternative was the closure of the factory. It was also true that the cost of living was falling, and some workers accepted that in the new post-war conditions they could afford to forego part of the high wages that had been won during the war. It was reported to the AEU DC that men at the Humber were earning up to £9 in a full week including war bonus, and some felt this could be

reduced in the interests of saving jobs.

In April 1921, at national negotiations, the employers proposed to reduce wages by a total of 16s a week. This would come on top of piece rate reductions already settled, and made it clear to workers the extent of the cuts being imposed. It was also clearer how to oppose it, and although there was little evidence of a determined fight in the city against rate cuts imposed shop by shop or man by man, there was a determination to support a national action against the EEF. At the end of April, 1,000 members of the AEU agreed at an aggregate meeting to support their union's opposition to the proposed reductions, and in June, when the negotiations were at a crucial stage, a meeting of 3,000 members called on the EC of the union to resist all attempts at wage reductions.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The negotiations went right to the brink. Two days before the reductions were due to take effect and the men to be locked out, the DC decided to call out all its apprentice members, foremen and staff members in the event of a lock-out. It also decided to approach each firm separately, and attempt to make arrangements to keep the rate up, in order to break a united employers' opposition.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The stoppage was due to start on the 16th June 1921 and the DC ordered its members not to work after the normal finishing time on the 15th. This was done, and shortly after a telegram was received calling off the action. The abortive stoppage had been encouraging, for

"All delegates reported that the members appeared to be nearly unanimous in their cessation of work and in a large portion of cases the members had brought out their tools."⁽⁴⁶⁾

A few days later some 5-6,000 members were present to hear the reasons for the suspension of action - the unions had decided to call a ballot

on the reductions.

The episode showed that members would respond to a national lead, but it was fortunate for the Coventry unions that the dispute did not take place, but preparation for a withdrawal of labour did not begin until two days before the day fixed for the lock-out. The AEU made no contact with the CEJC even though it would also have been involved with the dispute, nor were there any meetings between the AEU DC and its shop stewards. After the emergency, there was recognition of the lack of preparation, the minutes recording

"The Secretary drew attention to the position we were recently placed in owing to the Employers' Notices and urged some plan of organisation. After discussion DC resolved that a meeting of Organisation Sub-Committee and Chief Stewards be called immediately to consider what machinery is necessary in the event of a lockout."

(47)

This meeting decided on the need for a committee to co-operate with the CECJ, particularly setting up joint propaganda committees and a sub-committee to arrange food supplies with the Co-op. This was put to a meeting of the CEJC and agreed, together with the suggestion that a central strike committee would run a dispute for all of the unions.⁽⁴⁸⁾

This was a step forward, though had the AEU been in the CEJC organisation would have been tighter. The consideration of using the Co-op shows that the unions were anticipating a prolonged stoppage. However, no further action was taken over the next eight months.

The ballot over reductions rejected the employers' offers, but the unions accepted a phased reduction of 6s off time rates. No sooner was this carried out than the employers were back for more, and the 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ % war bonus was removed without a struggle. Although the DC of the AEU was prepared for a struggle, the membership refused to support it, and refused

to support a local levy for the unemployed unless it was voluntary. The response to this war poor, the DC regretting "the meagre response given (49) by our members in view of the enormous problem of destitution." The last AEU DC meeting of the year ended with a pious minute:

"The Chairman in closing the last meeting of 1921 expressed the hope that 1922 would be of a much pleasanter and prosperous character for all our members than the past 12 months had proved to be." (50)

The year of mass unemployment had shaken the trade unions of the city and discovered cracks and splits in its organisation. Far from being a relief, 1922 was to see those cracks widen to almost bring the whole movement crumbling down.

V Apprentices and Machines

Wages and overtime were the two main workshop problems between 1919 and 1922, but there were many others as well. These included the operation of different sorts of piece work, relation to time rates, war bonus and rates for new jobs such as setters up. In all of these cases, the unions wanted to establish their right to negotiate, while employers wished to make unilateral decisions, or negotiate with individual workers.

Other issues which were not primarily wage or payment issues nevertheless had a money side to them, particularly restrictions on output. There was also the position of apprentices, and the issue of who would work what machines. These more directly raised the question of workplace control.

Restrictions on output in order to ensure good piece work prices was a natural development from a piece work system, though the unions had agreed to drop the practice during the war. It revived after the war, though in

the conditions of the time it was unlikely to be widespread, as when faced with layoffs and short time workers wanted to make as much as they could while they were still at work. The employers pretended ignorance of this practice and complained when it was uncovered. An indignant minute of the CDEEA read

"It was reported that apparently in certain instances workpeople were deliberately working 'to a limit' and that where workers exceeded this self-imposed limit of earnings they were being victimised by the other workers." (50)

Complaints to union officials achieved little, as the practice was controlled either by stewards, or by the workers themselves. It remained a management grievance to be raised when the time was ripe.

There were a number of problems with young workers. The unions felt that boys were being used in too great a number as cheap labour. They wished to ensure that a sufficient number of boys were indentured as apprentices, and they wanted to be able to negotiate wage rates for them. The employers' policy was to often have large numbers of boys in the shop, the majority of whom were not apprentices, even though there would not be enough work for all of them when they were fully trained.

The indentures of apprenticeship were drawn up without consultation with the trade unions, for employers held that unions had no authority over apprentices. Some of the rules in the indentures were very strict, as well as being out of date. Thus one indenture drawn up in 1918 had a rule fining a boy for washing his hands in oil or wasting candles. A more restrictive rule was one that said that any apprentice who is absent without leave from work "Will forfeit double his wages and be subject to legal penalties."⁽⁵²⁾ This put the boy at the mercy of the employer. The AEU made it plain that it felt that indentures should be signed by employers,

unions and guardian, and that all should be responsible for training.

In mid-1919 a local conference with the ASE made no progress in establishing a district rate for apprentices with regular pay increases, but there was agreement limiting the number of apprentices to three for every ten journeymen. However, there were complaints after this, as employers used boys who were not apprentices.⁽⁵³⁾ Another local conference was held in February 1920, but the employers claimed it was a national question. Givens reported to the AEU DC that the issue had been around for 14 months, and that the union would have to take unilateral action if agreement was not reached.

The reference went to the Central Conference, and before this met, members of the DC discussed jobs advertised by employers at the labour exchange. They had found 15 jobs on offer for men aged 18-20, but none for craftsmen. It was resolved that

"The Secretary write to EC for permission to instruct our members to cease setting up for boys and youths on account of the practice abnormally developed by the Coventry employers only requiring men of 16 to 20 years in total disregard of promises made in Local Conference." ⁽⁵⁴⁾

There was no agreement at Central Conference, and again the DC suggested the cessation of "setting up for, teaching, or assisting boys or Apprentices in the Shops until an agreement can be reached" about their proportions, and wages, this time to the CEJC. The CEJC agreed, and a date was fixed that no more assistance would be given from Whitson.⁽⁵⁵⁾

However, when men began to refuse to set up, the employers took the matter to Central Conference. Here it was decided that the question be deferred pending a national agreement, and the EC of the AEU instructed the Coventry DC to lift its action pending national agreements - which were not forthcoming.⁽⁵⁶⁾ This brought to an end attempts to negotiate

for apprentices, but did not end objections to what the unions saw as misuse of young workers, as they felt they were being left in the workplaces while adults were discharged.

The apprentice issue and the use of young workers generally was closely related to the question of dilution; who would work with which machines? In the period up to the lock-out, the skilled unions did what they could to get all of the unskilled workers and women out of the trade.

As in the war period, this meant that the skilled unions took up an exclusive position on unskilled workers. This is illustrated by a minute of the ASE DC discussing a letter from the Daimler management on using unskilled workers. The company

"Claim they can upgrade any workman, as this was a pre-war practice. Secretary to suitably reply that a Painter or Cattle-drover, such as the men in question, cannot be upgraded in the Engineering Trade, and to again demand their removal." (47)

As the Coventry motor industry was new, the problems of unskilled workers on new machines was acute. Bates, the AEU Divisional official reported

"This Division, which contains some of the most up-to-date machine shops in the country, and is well organised on the employer's side, shows every indication of becoming the storm centre of this important question." (58)

The DC felt that there was scope for national agreements on machine manning, for some time after Bates' report it passed the following motion:

"That we, the members of the Coventry DC deplore the long delay in arriving at a satisfactory settlement of the Female Labour question, and the question of the large amount of Unskilled Male Labour being introduced in the manning of machines etc. We therefore call upon our Executive Council to immediately convene a National Conference, so that our future policy on these vital questions may be framed, and thus allay the grave unrest now so prevalent among our members." (59)

In this as in other matters, the DC was disappointed by the EC. There was a national conference, but not until 1921, which decided to resist all attempts by employers to control their machines, but it had little impact in the workplaces.

VI Shop Stewards in Decline

The shop stewards movement in Coventry was still strong at the end of the war, although perhaps it was not as strong as it had been. Union district committees were too busy to do much to bring stewards together, or to try to help workplace organisation, ^{CEJC stewards' meetings} ~~but these~~ tended to attract only a small number.

Because of the neglect of the movement, officials lost touch with workshop organisation. In September 1920 there was a strike of electricians at English Electric, and the AEU involvement was mainly to ensure that electricians did not switch unions in order to avoid the strike. The DC told the other union that it had no stewards at the factory, but later found out that there had been more than 30 stewards there for over a year, and at least 20 of them were in the AEU, although they had never been recognised by the DC.⁽⁶⁰⁾ The CEJC scheme whereby that body recognised all stewards more or less died in 1919/20, but this also had depended on the stewards actually letting officials know they were there.

This lack of recognition was not just at DC level. Cyril Taylor, who later had a number of senior posts in the AEU first become a shop steward in 1919 at Armstrong-Siddeley. The only people who were notified, other than the men in the department, were the rate fixer and the foreman. He was a steward there for 18 months, and in that time he never met the convenor,

nor did the latter know of his existence. Yet this was one of the best organised workplaces in Coventry at the time.⁽⁶¹⁾

In mid 1920 the establishment of the AEU led to attempts to improve organisation. Shop stewards were asked to meet to discuss what the new body would be like, and it was discovered that there were several factories without stewards, and attempts were made to find some.⁽⁶²⁾ A new shop stewards' group was formed, monthly meetings held, and a stewards' executive set up. This did act as an impetus, and a number of new stewards were appointed. A report in September 1920 showed that the AEU DC had 236 approved stewards. The list showed very uneven organisation. Daimler had 46 stewards, Swift 28 and Humber 22. But large factories like Dunlop, Hillman and Singer were reported as having only one or two.⁽⁶³⁾ Shortly after this, unemployment rose rapidly, and this put a strain on organisation. By November 1921 the Chairman of the AEU stewards group was talking about "The seriousness of the position of shop stewards, and their probable extinction."⁽⁶⁴⁾ The AEU stewards meetings themselves were not very successful. In 1921 the numbers at the meetings were only about half the previous year's, and there was difficulty in getting a stable executive together. There was also a couple of occasions where the stewards felt that Givens had acted without consulting stewards, and that the District Committee was not giving the stewards meeting full backing.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Eventually, the DC decided to abolish the monthly stewards meetings, on the eve of the lock-out, presumably because it wanted to feel in control of that dispute.⁽⁶⁶⁾

An attempt to improve the organisation was made in early 1921 when from an initiative of the revolutionaries that were still in the process of forming the CPGB, an attempt was made to re-establish the Coventry Workers' Committee. The main originator was Tom Dingley, who was

national organiser for the Shop Stewards and Workers' Committee Movement. After a lot of propaganda work had been done, Gallacher and Leckie were brought in, and invitations sent to various trade union bodies to attend a conference. This was only moderately successful, with 41 delegates present, representing the Trades Council, the AEU DC and Shop Stewards group, the CEJC shop stewards, Shop Assistants, Building Workers, Miners, and Transport Workers, as well as the CUWC. It agreed on a resolution,

"That this meeting, an organised body of workers representing every class of industry, resolve to get together and organise both inside and outside the factories by propaganda, with a view to obtaining control of the means of production, believing that this is the only solution of the present crisis of unemployment." (67)

A Workers' Committee of 12 was set up with Bob Thompson from the Daimler as Chairman, and Harry Emery from the CUWC as secretary. About five of the Committee were members of the CP, which shows that it was not as representative as it could be.

The sponsors of the Committee saw it as being a body whose job was to organise the workers in a revolutionary way, in the same way as the CUWC should organise the unemployed. Emery, while secretary of the latter and shortly before becoming secretary of the former, wrote

"There is every hope of the movement becoming a great power in Coventry. The workers of the towns must be prepared to take control of the factories, and thus lead the way to a general proletarian seizure of the means of production. The best way to prepare for that is the formation of revolutionary Workers' Committees inside the compound now." (68)

What this meant was that the Committee became a propaganda body rather than one which was really involved in organisation at work, and in this it was not different from the rest of the post-war Workers' Committee movement.⁽⁶⁹⁾ It had fortnightly meetings and involved itself in strikes

such as the one at Triumph, but it cannot be said to have made a major intervention in the industrial life of the city. In the circumstances, it would have been surprising if it had, for with the unions in retreat the likelihood of workers seizing the factories was remote.

Despite this, there was some sympathy for the Russian Revolution among engineers, and this was reflected at many of the aggregate meetings and some of the DC meetings in the ASE. In July 1919, over a year before the campaign to keep Britain out of war with the Soviet Union reached a crisis, a resolution was passed at an aggregate meeting to support a 24 hour stoppage against British intervention on 21st July. The proposers claimed that this was supporting the initiative taken by the Labour Party, but though a recent Labour Party Conference had discussed the situation and had threatened to use industrial action if need be, there is no record of it having called a 24 hour stoppage, and it seems to have been peculiar to Coventry. It is not known how many did actually stop work on 21st July, but there were enough for the DC to record its deprecation of the strikes. At Sterling Metals, some of the workers struck, and were locked out, and the rest of the factory came out in sympathy until they were taken back.⁽⁷⁰⁾

In November 1919 the ASE DC affiliated to the Hands off Russia Committee and sent a resolution to the EC supporting "drastic action."⁽⁷¹⁾ In December 1921, on the instigation of a member of the SLP, an AEU aggregate meeting passed a long resolution calling for "The bringing into being of the Shipbuilding and Engineering Section of the Workers International Industrial Union."⁽⁷²⁾ This was carried unanimously, and probably shows that most left wing motions stood a chance of going through provided they involved no serious action. Shortly before the lock-out the DC allowed the CP to leave its literature in the office where unemployed members signed

the vacancy book, and it was usually informed when CP engineering speakers were in the city.⁽⁷³⁾ By this time there were at least two, possibly three, CP members on the DC as well as other left-wingers, though the left was not in a majority.

CHAPTER FOUR

PART II

The Managerial Functions Dispute

The managerial functions dispute was a result of the initiative of the EEF in its dealings with the AEU and other unions at national level, but the necessity for the dispute could be seen by Coventry employers. The EEF wished to establish its member's right to introduce changes pending negotiations, and to determine the amount of overtime without reference to the trade unions. After much negotiations, the AEU E.C. recommended these terms to the membership, but they were decisively rejected in a ballot. The other 46 unions were also put in the same position, but were not faced with a lock-out at the same time as the AEU, which was informed that from 11th March its members would be barred from work in Federated shops. As the dispute had been dragging on from November 1921 both sides had ample opportunity to organise and prepare for the struggle, but a survey of local records of both sides shows that the employers were much more prepared than the AEU.

At the time of the lock-out the AEU had about 11,000 members, but 2,133 were unemployed, and a number of others were on short time.⁽⁷⁴⁾ In February 1922 the AEU shop stewards met to consider the state of their organisation and found a varied situation. Reports showed that the stewards at the Armstrong-Siddeley were "flourishing" and at the Humber they "were in good condition." At the Daimler, the Chairman of the Works Committee had just been laid off, and it was stated "That (the) Stewards movement was rather dormant at present owing to discharges and indifferent working." At Herberts the situation was poor and it was difficult to find

stewards, while at Standard Canley "Movement almost non-existent" was the report. Perhaps the most significant statement about organisation was the fact that only 16 stewards turned up for the meeting.⁽⁷⁵⁾

The AEU initially left the dispute to its Disputes sub-committee, which was not particularly active prior to the lock-out. It did discuss making arrangements with the Co-op for the supply of food and the use of its banking facilities and decided that shop stewards in the different works would be responsible for picketing when the dispute began. It also met the CEJC to get support in the event of a dispute.⁽⁷⁶⁾ The first sign of disagreement on the union side occurred only three days before the lock-out, when the AEU Unemployment Committee met the Organisation sub-committee and threatened to break away from AEU leadership and throw its lot in with the CUWC.⁽⁷⁷⁾ This body had been quicker off the mark than the AEU, and on March 4th had called a local conference to bring trade union and unemployed groups together to form a joint organisation for any lock-out. This was rejected by the AEU DC as "interference" but there was by no means complete disapproval of what had happened, for a few days later Jack Leckie, who was a member of the AEU, was allowed to speak for 20 minutes to the DC, where it was reported he gave

"An excellent and interesting address dealing with the present position, and administered constructive criticism, to the Society generally, he strictly adhered to the conditions as laid down by the Chairman re confining himself to Industrial and non-controversial remarks." ⁽⁷⁸⁾

The same meeting heard reports on the members' morale, "The representatives' opinion varying considerably."

Although the Disputes Committee remained in existence, once the lock-out began, the DC took over responsibility. In a circular on the eve of the lock-out the DC assumed responsibility and gave instructions for

picketing - a number of centres were set up. A few days later, the DC set itself up as a Lockout Committee, but two days later, after an aggregate meeting attended by Brownlie, the union General Secretary, nominations were taken for an elected Lockout Committee, and this was quickly elected at a mass meeting.⁽⁷⁹⁾ It did not have its first meeting until 23rd March, twelve days after the lock-out had started.

In contrast, the CDEEA showed much greater foresight and preparation. In January 1922 it had sent its views on the need to reduce labour costs to the EEF, and wanted a reduction in wages, an increase in hours, full acceptance of piece-work, uniform wage rates, and the acceptance by unions of the employers' memorandum on managerial rights.⁽⁸⁰⁾ At a meeting at the end of January the minutes record support for the EEF:

"It was agreed by all present that a very strong line should be adopted by Employers as a whole to insist that they should retain the right to manage their own factories." ⁽⁸¹⁾

There were a number of factories in Coventry that were not in the CDEEA and a number like Swift Motors that were in the CDEEA but not in the EEF, and John Varley, the full time secretary of the CDEEA contacted these firms that were not party to the dispute to ensure that they would not take on workers who were locked out at Federation workshops, and in February he was able to report a good response to his approaches.

At one point, there was the possibility of a split appearing in the ranks of the employers. Sir Alfred Herbert took the unusual step of appearing at one of the Associated meetings in person and argued

"That he considered that the action that was being taken by the Federation in forcing a lock-out on the question of overtime at the present time was one that would prove to be unpopular with public opinion, and in his opinion he considered that the adverse ballot vote of the AEU should have been left for the time being..."

However, it is clear these were differences of approach rather than substance for he went on to argue for a

"Lock-out forced on the more concrete question of a reduction in wages of the 26/6 per week war awards."

Col. J. Cole of Humber, the President of the CDEEA disagreed;

"The main point at issue was not on the question of overtime being worked, but whether Employers should maintain their right to manage their own shops." (82)

Sir Alfred Herbert had raised two important points. One was the need to present a good case to defeat union propaganda on the lines of the need to cut out overtime while many were out of work, and the other was whether the managerial functions argument should be linked with a demand for a further reduction. While the lock-out was on, this second issue was discussed, by the Executive Committee of the CDEEA.

"It was agreed by all present that so far as regards the Members of the AEU are concerned, the questions of wage reduction and working conditions should be cleared up before the men are taken back." (83)

The reason given for this was "To get over any breach of faith" by causing another lock-out over a wage reduction, but it could also be interpreted as getting as much out of a defeated trade union movement as possible. However, this point of view was not taken up by the EEF. Sir Alfred Herbert's first point, of the need for a good case was dealt with at the same meeting, for a pamphlet issued by the Federation was sent to the Association and "It was agreed that the Secretary should arrange for prominence to be given to this pamphlet in the local press." (84)

The AEU did not feel that its links with the local press were strong enough to make similar arrangements, and the main force of its propaganda was to send circulars to its members, and to help the circulation of a

local leaflet called the Labour Record, which gave its case, and 20,000 of which were printed by the Trades Council.⁽⁸⁵⁾ But the CDEEA had greater resources, and concentrated on winning over foremen and charge-hands, although leaflets and posters putting the employers case were also distributed round all the factories.

The CDEEA went to great lengths to ensure that foremen were well educated in the employers' case. For many years the employers had adopted a strategy of weaning the foremen from the unions, and treating them as first line management, owing management their first loyalties. Thus the Foremans Mutual Benefit Society had been funded by employers, and they had received preferential treatment for some time. This paid off in the lock-out. In a circular letter at the beginning of March Varley pointed out to employers

"The desirability of putting the Employers' point of view clearly and definitely before the foremen in the various establishments so that the foremen will be in a position to clearly indicate to the men under them exactly what is in issue and at stake in this connection." (86)

Varley was well aware that some foremen were AEU members, so although publicity material was sent out with the circular letter, he went on to write

"Personally I do not think it desirable for this document to be handed to the foremen in case some of them might be members of the AEU with the possibilities, in consequence, of it being handed over by the foreman, either deliberately or otherwise, to their union."

The accompanying notes also stressed the importance of the foremen, and tried to show how they would suffer if the unions were not defeated:

"Foremen are asked to consider exactly what their own individual position is going to be if all their instructions are in the ordinary course of business to be subject to review and veto by the men, the Shop Stewards and the Unions." (87)

This, of course, was a considerable overstatement, but calculated to encourage foremen to see unions as a threat to their authority.

This consistent policy to foremen contrasted with the confusion on the union side. Initially it appears that foremen were expected to come out, but as employers did not lock them out, most did not do so, and ^{as} long as they did not encourage blacklegs or apprentices to do the locked out men's work, little pressure was put on them. Later in the dispute, when some men had gone back, the AEU and other unions decided to bring all their foremen out. Some foremen members of the AEU wrote to their EC and received replies telling them they did not have to come out. This prompted the DC to write to the EC,

"Emphatically protesting against EC replying to individual members upon any pretext thereby very seriously undermining ^{the unity} of our members here." (88)

The EC then instructed the DC not to withdraw its foremen, and the ODD Orrell took this to mean that those few foremen who had come out were to be sent back. However, it was pointed out at the DC that locally the AEU was part of the Joint Committees running the dispute, and that body had agreed to pull out foremen and so it was decided to leave the foremen out. Confusion reigned.

Foremen were seen by employers as important for two reasons. In the first place they had the ear of the workers, and were in a position to influence some of them, and therefore they had to be well primed with the employers' point of view; secondly, they were likely to know who were trade union members and who were not, and therefore could be used to ensure that every AEU member at first and later every trade union member was shown the door.

Varley was very concerned to see that AEU members were not allowed to

skulk in the works when they should have been locked out. He suggested to the employers before the lock-out started that

"Individual firms will, no doubt, have ways and means of procuring the information but it is suggested that the foremen would, in all probability, be able to furnish such information if asked to do so but in this connection it is suggested that the foremen should be warned to be very discreet in their enquiries. In case, however, difficulty is experienced it is suggested that it might reasonably be assumed that all skilled engineers are members of the AEU and if and when the lock-out becomes operative the onus should be then placed on any man... to prove...that he is a member of some other Union or, in fact, a non-Unionist." (89)

Varley stressed this point on a number of occasions, for it was the intention of the employers to inflict a heavy and decisive defeat on trade unionism in the workplace. A second circular sent out on the eve of the strike, and, heavily emphasised, said

"Unless an Employer is satisfied beyond any question that a workman has in truth and in fact irrevocably severed his connection with the AEU, such workman ought not, without definite instructions from this Association be retained in the employ of the firm or be re-engaged after the expiry of the lock-out notice." (90)

In the first week of the lock-out, even this very tough attitude hardened. Dealing with workers who claimed they had left the AEU and therefore were not locked out, Varley wrote to his members

"The only condition under which the service of such men shall be continued is that the men must furnish documentary evidence that they have been expelled from the Union." (91)

This was also underlined. Thus from the start of the dispute it was quite clear that as far as the employers were concerned this was not a normal dispute but an attempt to pick out every AEU member in the city covered by the Employers Association and inflict a personal defeat on them. It was an attempt to deal with the union once and for all.

Whatever the state of preparation of the different parties, it is

clear that virtually all AEU members came out on March 11th, which in view of the attitude of the employers, is not surprising. There were a number of large non-federated works in the city, and AEU members worked as normal at these. The first reports from the employers show that 5,303 men were locked out, and 110 laid off as a result.⁽⁹²⁾ This would be about 60% of AEU members in work in the city. AEU shop stewards' first returns claimed that only about 78 members had failed to come out, and about one third of these were at the Rover.⁽⁹³⁾ They also claimed that a small number of lapsed members and non-unionists had come out, though this may have been thanks to the employers rather than solidarity. Although the organisation on the AEU side left something to be desired, it is clear that union leaders saw this as a major struggle, for it was resolved

"Our members are instructed that no arrangement can be made for a restart unless proof is given that they (ie the firms) have seceded from the Federation and entered into an agreement with this DC." ⁽⁹⁴⁾

Thus the AEU were looking to the possibility of also inflicting a major defeat. The dispute was fairly quiet for the first few weeks. Picketing was at a low level, and there was little enthusiasm shown. However, a well-attended aggregate meeting agreed to step it up, as there were a number of workplaces, such as the Daimler, where there were small numbers of union members at work. This led to the Chief Constable complaining about the use of mass pickets.⁽⁹⁵⁾ However, much of the picketing was done by the Joint Committee set up by the CUWC, and the DC for some time refused to associate with it. This led to disagreements between the DC and the elected Lockout Committee.

The Lockout Committee saw itself as running the dispute, but was told by the DC that it was subject to the DC which took the final decisions, and which, unlike the Lockout Committee, was not prepared to co-operate

with outside bodies. This attitude angered the Lockout Committee, which sent a letter to the EC

"To enquire specifically the functions of the L.O.C. particularly with respect to co-operation with other bodies, descriptions of delegations allowed, submitting of minutes to D.C., definite decision re withdrawal of men." (96)

The reply came some 10 days later, and was regarded by the Lockout Committee as 'disappointing' for it declared the DC to be the authority in the lock-out.⁽⁹⁷⁾ So upset were the members of the Lockout Committee that they decided to refuse to continue submitting their minutes to the DC, and called for an aggregate meeting, at the end of which they would resign en bloc. However, it was eventually agreed to meet the DC, and both bodies called an aggregate meeting to discuss picketing arrangements, and the Lockout Committee decided "In view of the more amicable feelings now displayed" not to resign. It was agreed to carry on arrangements as before.⁽⁹⁸⁾

The Lockout Committee objected to being responsible for picketing, but having all their actions subject to DC approval. It was also unhappy at the poor response to the calls for picketing, and felt that it was being deprived of information necessary to run the dispute. It deferred making a decision on relations with other bodies, but some of the members of the committee felt there should be an exchange of delegates between their body and the unofficial committee, which had the CUWC and the AEU Unemployed Committee working together. The DC would not change its attitude on other bodies, but resolved

"That where Pickets had been summonsed by Lockout Committee to act and had not responded, the Secretary to notify their branch secretaries to stop benefits for the period in default as a fine for neglect of duty." (99)

The lockout was carried on as before for another week, but the response of union members to picketing remained poor. Five weeks after the lock-out began a few weaknesses were beginning to show. The pickets at the Hotchkiss reported that blacklegs, non-union men and other unions were keeping production almost up to normal, and there were reports of other weak spots. The Lockout Committee decided that "The time had now passed for conciliatory methods and that we must adopt more stringent and severe tactics with these firms." It called for the merger of the Lockout Committee and the DC, joint demonstrations and pickets with the Lockout Committee and the DC, with union officials trying to get more members involved, and "That we ask DC to co-operate with Central Unemployed Workers Committee for demonstration purposes, owing to the critical position." (100)

This produced a speedy confrontation; the next day Leckie was allowed to speak to the Lockout Committee, and he called for united action:

"It was pointed out to him that it was a coincidence that his remarks were similar to those as expressed by this committee the previous day." (101)

Encouraged by this reception, Leckie and others went to see the DC on the same day. Alex Maddison from the AEU Unemployed Committee referred to an ultimatum given earlier; "That if a move was not made within seven days the rank and file would take charge." That time was now up, as Leckie told them:

"On March 4th an unofficial Conference was held when it was decided to pool all available forces, AEU, other societies, and the Central Unemployed Committee, but we were now faced with a split owing to the attitude of the AEU District Committee and Lock Out Committee, and they were now determined to fix up an unofficial committee to take control of the Lockout. The Rank and File were disgusted with the position in Coventry and he gave 24 hours ultimatum to link up with (the) Central Unemployed Committee. They had between 12 and 13 hundred members and would know what to do." (102)

When the DC decided to defer a decision over the weekend, Leckie declared that this was not good enough, and "they were not taking it."

On the Monday, a meeting of the DC, the Lockout Committee, and representatives from the AEU Unemployed Committee took place. It re-organised the Lockout Committee, by incorporating most of the DC into it. It then set up an Executive Committee of eleven, a Finance Committee, a Picketing Committee and a Complaints and Enquiries Committee. It decided to co-opt a number of delegates from the AEU Unemployed Committee, but would not have anything to do with the CUWC. This decision was given to representatives of the CUWC who "Showed extreme disapproval". So extreme that the minutes of the meeting went on very shortly to record

"Our business was then suspended for a time owing to the proceedings being interrupted by the forceful entry of a large number of our members."

After a further exchange of views the members left. They were replaced by a deputation from the Hotchkiss, who pointed out that despite their pleas for help, more new men were being taken on every day. These two interruptions appear to have had an effect, for it was then decided that a Joint Committee of the Lockout Committee, the AEU Unemployed, and the CUWC be set up with the purpose of running the pickets and the demonstrations.⁽¹⁰³⁾ At an aggregate meeting in the evening, speakers from all of the bodies, including Leckie, spoke, and it appears that the Joint Committee was accepted, though it was also agreed that a Joint Committee of unions would be formed when the other unions were locked out. In the same evening, the first results of this decision was seen, for between 1 and 2,000 workers picketed the Hotchkiss. Bob Orrell spoke in the street, but some men broke into the factory and only left after Leckie was allowed to address some of the workers. There was some attacks on blacklegs, and the breaking of windows.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾

This was one of the turning points in the lock-out, for it meant the body that was now called the Joint Council of Trade Unions and Unemployed was given at least partial recognition and allowed to get on with the running of pickets at a time when they were clearly needed, and just before the other unions joined the AEU and the workplaces were thrown open to non-union labour. In effect, this Joint Council ran the lock-out, although a Joint Executive Committee was also set up which had the final say in calling any decisions about returns to work. This Committee had two delegates from each union, and was attended by all the local full time officers. However, the crucial job was to stop any return to work, and here the Joint Council was the body that mobilised the workers and captured all the publicity. In effect it put Leckie, Dingley, Maddison and other leaders of the unemployed at the head of the lock-out. This was what the DC had sought to avoid, but it became inevitable when it was clear that the DC and the Lockout Committee were not able to mobilise the membership in the way that the CUWC could. This was a great victory for the Communist leadership of the CUWC, and for Leckie, who together with Dingley seized the opportunity to get as much publicity as possible. Yet it was a sad comment on the state of the Coventry trade union movement that in an industrial dispute of this kind it took the best part of seven weeks to arrive at an uneasy compromise on how the lock-out should be run, and even to achieve this it had meant the most extreme actions such as the breaking up of meetings and confrontation with DC officials. The attitude of the officials of the AEU, who were reported to be very upset at the events, was similar to that of the CEJC when faced by Dingley and his shop committee in 1917. They were prepared to weaken the union side rather than allow control to pass to the militants. This victory for the militants was achieved at

the expense of exacerbating the relations between the Labour Party and the Communist Party, leading to Bob Williams' attacks on the demonstrations. It also completely identified the militants with the leadership of the lock-out - if it were to be defeated it would be a defeat for them more than for Orrell and Givens.

The lock-out of the other engineering unions took effect on 3rd May, about eight weeks after the AEU were locked out. These unions had also refused to accept the managerial functions document of the EEF, and their lock-out had been preceded by lengthy negotiations. Early on in these negotiations, the Coventry Association had unanimously approved their lock-out, but different opinions emerged when more detailed negotiations took place. On the 18th April Varley wrote to John Milburn from the Humber who was acting as the Coventry delegate to the EEF for the negotiations, commenting on the proposals that had been sent to him. The shipbuilding and engineering unions had gone a long way to avoid a settlement by giving up the status quo. Where there was a disagreement in the workplace over conditions, the unions suggested that management should give notice of any impending change, and then

"The management shall be entitled on the expiration of the notice to give a temporary decision upon which work shall proceed pending the following procedure being carried through." (105)

Varley wrote about this:

"Having gone carefully through the various offers and counter-offers made at the conferences between the 10th and 14th April instant I cannot, for the life of me, understand why the Employers could not fix up an agreement on the document dated 11/4/22 and marked "D" in the documents herewith.

It seems to me, in the absence of any explanations, that the only possible complaint we could have is in regard to the expression 'temporary decision' and I am sure wit enough could have been found to get over this verbal squabble.

Apparently following on the rejection of this offer by the Unions to the Employers things appear to have drifted until they got into an altogether impossible position. On the face of it, however, one is bound to ask why the proposal of the Unions as set forth in document "D" was not accepted because that contains about all we want.

On thinking over this question further I suggest that the Executive Board ought to consider whether they will get another mandate from the various associations in view of the position which has now cropped up, because I do feel that we require to have unanimity in this matter if we are to go on with the lock-out and carry it into operation as regards the 51 Unions (other than the A.E.U.) - would not a retrospect of the whole position be useful at this stage?" (106)

Other records from the Coventry Association make it clear that Varley was not one to give unnecessary concessions to unions, yet it is clear from this letter that his own view was that the EEF were creating a lock-out when one was not needed. Whether Milburn pressed for a re-assessment or not is not known, but the lock-out went on despite Varley's reservations and as an employee of the Association he suppressed his own views. Six days after writing the above letter he sent out a circular to CDEEA members, which claimed,

"It will be observed that the Unions are still insisting that in the event of their members in a shop considering that any change made by an Employer in his works is a material change, the Employers should suspend putting the change into operation until a representative of the Union concerned has had an opportunity of discussing the matter with the management. In other words the Union are endeavouring to secure that the Union concerned shall, instead of the Employer, be the deciding party as to what is a material change." (107)

This statement was clearly at variance with his earlier assessment of the way negotiations had gone, and amounted to putting a quite inaccurate interpretation on the events. The notes that Varley received containing the unions' offers were not circulated to CDEEA members, they only received the above circular. It is possible then, that in the

interests of unity, Varley not only suppressed his own views about the dispute, but suppressed the notes sent to him, and produced a quite different version that was bound to strengthen the resolve of local employers.

On 3rd May members of the other engineering unions, including the WU joined their colleagues out on the streets. Despite some signs of weakness, and the poor organisation of the AEU the bulk of the membership remained firm. The Midland Daily Telegraph commented

"It appears that very few have returned to their shops, the Trade Union officials expressing satisfaction at the loyalty and solidarity of the men." (108)

The factories were opened to all AEU members who wished to renounce their union and return, but there were few takers. The only figures available are for the two Herbert's factories: on 3rd May only 1 of the 280 locked out AEU members went back. Nevertheless the Joint Council was very busy. The Midland Daily Telegraph reported that pickets were active at all the factories, and

"The lock-out men and the unemployed had their headquarters on the Pool Meadow from which there was directed a stream of scouts on motor bicycles and push bicycles, who reported periodically as to the situation at the different works." (109)

This must have been the most open and public labour dispute in the city since 1860. In mid-morning news came through to Pool Meadow that Len Jackson and Jack Preece, Communist leaders of the Joint Council, had been arrested, and the whole crowd marched off "A mass of singing and marching men and women." Jackson and Preece had led a group of pickets to a small workshop, Monk Engineering, off the High Street where work was still going on. The pickets had broken down the main doors and got into the machine shops and the upstairs premises. Police had fought their way through the

crowd to get in, arrested some pickets, then had to fight their way out, leading a baton charge to clear the way. Four people, including Jackson and Preece, were arrested, but the crowd, estimated at 3,000 surrounded St. Mary's Hall and the Police Station. A deputation of Leckie, Orrell, Morris and other union officials went to see the Mayor, and after promises of good behaviour the men were released. Singing the Red Flag, and amid scenes of enthusiasm, the crowd returned to Pool Meadow to continue picketing.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ Soon after he had been released, Preece led a deputation to the Guardians to protest about supposed reductions in relief. Strong picketing and demonstrations continued for the next few days, with the Midland Daily Telegraph commenting "The system of following men home is adopted in many instances."⁽¹¹¹⁾ In fact, this was what Leckie described as "scientific picketing" and he told the local paper on 6th May that it was entirely successful except for one factory (probably Smiths Stamping Works). Leckie was not one to miss drama, and he claimed that police were looking for a confrontation and would not allow more than two pickets per factory, and that the CID were seeking him as well as other Joint Council leaders. Although that day was a Saturday, and there were no demonstrations planned, a large crowd turned up in Pool Meadow almost out of habit. This series of large meetings upset the police, and on the same day reinforcements arrived from Birmingham.⁽¹¹²⁾ On that day there was a meeting between the Mayor and representatives from the Joint Executive Lockout Committee and the Joint Council to try to ensure that picketing would be peaceful. The Joint Council was not put off, for mass picketing continued for the next week, though without any violence.

The CDEEA was greatly angered by the picketing. The executive on 5th May commented

"It was generally agreed that a great amount of intimidation was going on, and but for this there would be a ready response for a general return to work." (112)

Complaints were made about "The apparent lack of protection that was being given by the local police," and a deputation went to the Mayor the same day. They got a "very weak" response, for he admitted that

"The local police force was totally inadequate for complete protection against intimidation to the various workpeople who were willing to work." (114)

Nevertheless, following this deputation and a visit to the Home Secretary by Sir Edward Manville, Coventry's M.P., extra police were sent into the city. The employers had been a little disappointed at the response of the men on 3rd May for they had hoped for a better return. A circular letter had been sent round advising that men going in should arrive in a body "rather than in drablets" in order to intimidate the pickets but this had not worked.⁽¹¹⁵⁾ Well before the lock-out had reached this stage, the CDEEA had been considering the possibility of public disorder and the role of the Association in dealing with it. A circular letter sent out on March 11th, the date of the original lock-out, suggested measures "So that we may be ready if and when the emergency occurs." Varley wrote

"I have to suggest the desirability of all members endeavouring to ascertain discreetly and in the strictest confidence which members of their staff are prepared to be sworn in as Special Constables for the City of Coventry or the surrounding County areas as the case may be, during the present crisis. The Employers will no doubt find that in the majority of instances there are certain members of their staff who have had police experience (either as Special Constables or otherwise) during the War, and these men would of course be most useful if they would express their willingness to act in the emergency which has arisen." (116)

It is not known whether this circular had the approval of the local police

force, but in the event nothing seems to have come of it. It is interesting to note that unlike the letter dealing with foremen, there is no hesitation about members of staff having split loyalties.

The introduction of police from Birmingham reduced the number of violent incidents, and police began to try to reduce the number if pickets outside each workplace. On May 16th the Midland Daily Telegraph reported that "Mass picketing has been abolished," but this was premature.⁽¹¹⁷⁾ The police were keeping a closer eye on the pickets, but it was still going on. It was not confined to Coventry - Leckie led 120 cycle pickets to Rugby to demonstrate outside the magistrates' court where a locked out worker was being charged with intimidation.⁽¹¹⁸⁾ On May 22nd a demonstration accompanied some lawyers to the railway station in Coventry after they had defended successfully an arrested picket, and then, taking the police by surprise, went off to the Swift and Maudsley works, where they prevented the workers from leaving for their lunch breaks until Orrell and others had interviewed the management and got promises that overtime would be kept to a minimum.⁽¹¹⁹⁾ Swift was not a member of the CDEEA and so was not involved in the lock-out. The next day there were "lively" scenes at the Coventry Chain and Rover works, with the following of blacklegs and vigorous picketing.⁽¹²⁰⁾ On May 26th Leckie saw the Chief Constable, and agreed on plans for peaceful mass pickets, and in the evening appealed for order.⁽¹²¹⁾ However, returning from Leamington on May 27th, Leckie had an accident on his motor cycle which put him out of activity for some days. A couple of days later Tom Dingley was charged with incitement and disturbing the peace in speeches he had given in Birmingham and was put in jail on remand. Coming at a time when the numbers on the picket line were dwindling, and the numbers going back were increasing, this took a

lot of steam out of the Joint Council plans for picketing. By this time it was already clear that there was less enthusiasm for picketing duty and complaints that the union officers were not giving a lead and leading too much for the unofficial Joint Committee.

Before the accident to Leckie, a number of demonstrations had been to the Boards of Guardians. The struggles over relief and unemployment benefit played an important part in the overall dispute. Workers were not entitled to unemployment benefit for taking part in a trade dispute, but some were claiming that they were not party to the dispute but had been laid off as a result of it. Others were claiming that they would have been laid off for lack of work anyway. When some AEU members got judgements in their favour at the local Court of Referees, Varley became very concerned, and circulated his members:

"Special attention should be given to all cases of this kind. The fullest information should be given to the Court which may tend to show, as a matter of fact and not merely as a matter of the firm's opinion that the men have actually lost their employment by reason of a stoppage of work due to a trade dispute at the works!"

He emphasised the need to have representatives present for insurance cases, for

"One of the grounds on which benefit is sometimes claimed is that the firm, by re-arranging their work, have managed to carry on without a stoppage. In such a case, even if no complete stoppage can be proved, it is desirable to show that there has been an appreciable stoppage or at least a substantial check to the work." (122)

When he was unable to reverse decisions made locally, Varley went down to London to see the Umpire on insurance cases; on behalf of Herberts, who had about 100 workers laid off besides those locked out, he was able to get the cases referred back as the true state of affairs had not been represented to the Court of Referees. There may have been a few workers

who were able to claim unemployment benefit, but for the most part it appears that Varley's action was sufficient to block that approach.

The Boards of Guardians needed less special attention from the employers, for politically they represented Conservative and Liberal opinion in the city. The Guardians had a duty to provide relief for all who needed it, but did not relish supporting workers involved in a dispute, so relief for most of the lock-out was in kind only. When the employers decided to open their works to all workers, the Foleshill Guardians, whose conduct has already been referred to, issued a notice as follows:

"Various works have been thrown open to men previously locked-out, any man not returning to work is, under the law, on strike, and the law forbids any form of relief for men on strike. Effect will be given to this law after this week." (123)

Of course the men were able to return, but only if they repudiated their unions, and accepted the position of management. This decision amounted to the Guardians coming down on the side of the employers. They were followed by the Coventry Board, which made a similar ruling but with one important difference. No relief would be given to the locked-out men, but wives and families would be allowed outdoor relief. This differed from Foleshill, where the families of the men involved in the dispute were given no form of relief of any kind.

At the next meeting of the Foleshill Guardians, there was a large crowd present, a deputation was turned away, and the Guardians were jeered as they left.⁽¹²⁴⁾ The two Labour members of the Board managed to get another meeting called, but the same decision was reached. Speaking in Rugby, Alice Arnold threatened that the Guardians would need police support from all over the country if they persisted in this attitude:

"Unless these people get food and drink by fair means, we are prepared to use any and every means to see that they are got." (125)

The last meeting of the Guardians had led to violence, for the Relieving Officer Thomas was chased, but there were no incidents at other meetings, for by then the lock-out was showing signs of crumbling. In Stoke Heath, an attempt was made to reply to the attitude of the Guardians by refusing to pay rent while the lock-out was on. It is not known how widespread this was.

The situation was not so bad in Coventry, though the unions were very unhappy that relief was not to be paid to those involved in the dispute from May 11th. A number of demonstrations took place outside the Board Room. At one of them, the Guardians refused to meet a deputation, and the ever militant Leckie took exception to this. Saying the deputation should force its way in he declared to the demonstration. "If you say go, I will get inside, or be in prison this afternoon."⁽¹²⁶⁾ He was spared this sacrifice, for the Guardians saw a deputation later. After another deputation from the Joint Executive Committee and the Joint Council the Guardians appear to have modified their position, and decided to give relief in kind to workers in the dispute, and a payment for the rent, provided they could show they had no other source of income.⁽¹²⁷⁾ This proviso could be serious, for the Foleshill Guardians would also give relief, provided a family could show that it was destitute, and it had a strict definition of what destitution involved. Although the situation in Coventry was better, the general position about relief was a considerable incentive to drive people back to work, for the best that was possible was the humiliation of proving that the family was entitled to a small bundle of food per week. Orrell commented after the dispute that

"The pressure brought to bear upon the Guardians by the employing class did much more than some people imagine in breaking down the determination of our members." (128)

In fact, although there may have been pressure brought to bear, the general attitude shown by the Guardians, particularly the Foleshill Guardians indicates that they did not require special treatment.

The attitude of the Guardians was important for the dispute exhausted the funds of the unions. Initially the AEU paid its members for picketing duty, but when the other unions were involved and did not pay their men, the AEU gave up the practice. It had a distress fund, and paid needy cases out of this, including non-unionists who had been locked out as well, though the AEU felt that non-unionists should be taken over by all the unions. Some fund raising schemes were put in hand, including the use of the Foleshill Picture Palace for a concert (the manager was a supporter of the unions), but the unions were in a financial mess by the end of the dispute. The Joint Council had little funds, and appealed without success to the unions for funds. The AEU DC did however, contribute £5 to the repair of Leckie's motor-cycle. (129)

The employers played their final card a week after the lock-out of all the unions. Having taken steps that would abolish strong picketing, or so they thought, for in fact as mentioned the demonstrations carried on for another two weeks, the Executive Committee of the Employers' Association decided to act in concert and throw open the factories with the threat that if the workers did not return they would get non-union labour to permanently replace them. Varley sent out a circular which first dealt with police protection:

"I am gratified to be able to inform you that the Police Authorities in this City have now definitely undertaken to take strong steps with any demonstrators who may appear outside the works, so as to ensure that only

'Peaceful picketing' shall in fact take place in accordance with the terms of the Trades Disputes Act of 1906.

Similarly as regards the formation of processions and the escorting of workmen home from work by crowds of communists etc., the local Police Authorities have, I understand, intimated their determination to prevent individual intimidation to workmen either at the shops or in their houses."

He then went on to say that all of the federated firms should apply to the Labour Exchange on 9th May,

"The object of this application, of course, being to let each firm's own individual workpeople know that the firm is in earnest in its determination to carry on."

However, no new workers should be taken on until 11th May,

"So that in the interim your own particular craftsmen may be given an opportunity of asking to come back into your employ on the terms set forth in the poster of the 1st May instant.

It is essential for the success of this scheme that each firm should act promptly in accordance with the suggestion set forth above and take its own means to let it be known amongst its own workpeople that jobs are waiting for them provided they offer themselves before Thursday morning, 11th May instant."

Finally, the letter spelt out what should be the attitude of the firms to any new non-union workers that were taken on to replace the locked out workers. Varley made it clear to the employers that

"You are authorised by this Association to give a definite undertaking to each of these new workpeople as follows:-

'That notwithstanding the fact that they were not in the employ of the Company prior to the present dispute, as from the date of their engagement with the Company their position will be safeguarded by the Company if it is proved that they are capable of doing the particular work for which they are engaged and as far as the state of trade from time to time permits.'

In other words, any new hands who are engaged under the above scheme will be guaranteed employment by your firm under the conditions mentioned above and will not be liable to be displaced by the men who are unwilling to accept employment on the terms suggested by the Employers."

However, he concluded

"A united effort should be made by all Members of their Association to get their own workpeople back into the various shops." (130)

This approach was too much for one employer, for when Sir Alfred Herbert received his copy of the circular letter, he wrote on it "This promise is not to be made" next to the section which offered a safeguard to new workers. (131) Sir Alfred prided himself on relations with unions, and was prepared to take his original workforce back. It became clear that the way the employers would let it be known that jobs were to be filled between the 9th May and 11 was through the foremen. That they did their jobs successfully can be deduced from a list of complaints drawn up by the AEU Lockout Committee. It wanted all foremen to join the lock-out because they were

"1. Supervising blackleg labour. 2. Working at the tools since March 11th. 3. Leaving the works and appealing to members at their homes to restart at their respective shops under the same conditions as rejected by ballot vote of our members. 4. Calling works meetings outside the gates for the purpose of intimidating our members to return to work." (132)

The unions' response to the employers' initiative was to call out their foremen members, withdraw their volunteer firemen and call out those few members who were full time firemen at work. This last decision led to protests by Manville in the House of Commons, but the first ran into difficulties, for in an unusual act of partisanship, the Midland Daily Telegraph refused to publish the AEU advertisement calling out foremen. (133) Moreover, as we have seen there was confusion with the national office over calling out foremen, and anyway most of them did not respond. The role of foremen in keeping the work going for management as well as persuading many men back in was most important. One foreman who bothered to attend the DC meeting when asked was from the

Rudge Whitworth. He reported that he

"At present had some 30 females under him, previously some 18 to 20 setters up were employed but he had no men left in. There were about 120 machines and as one broke down he transferred the women to another. On being asked who changed the Tools he replied the women changed their own Tools." (134)

Not surprisingly, he was censored by the DC.

The attempt to get the men back by the 11th May was not immediately successful. On 12th May Givens admitted that there were men who had gone into the factories, but claimed that these were bad workmen and that 99% of skilled workers were still out. Nevertheless, it would appear that from this date there was a small stream of people going back. There was also a decline of morale, and a decline in the number of people prepared to picket. On 16th May the Lockout Committee of the AEU complained that

"There seems to be no one in charge at some of the shops and the picketing system generally is far from satisfactory." (135)

About a week later, it was complaining

"This Committee views with alarm the lack of co-operation of other Societies with AEU as regards picket duty and deplores the action of polishers in going to work at the Triumph after pledging themselves to stand solid with other Societies at yesterday's demonstrations." (136)

Although the situation was deteriorating, the dispute was far from lost, and there was no general return to work in May, though the AEU Lockout Committee commented on 31st May "There seemed to be a slight increase in numbers started at one or two shops." (137) But a greater danger was of the other engineering unions going back. In fact an agreement had been reached in principle, and this was seized upon by the local employers; Varley wrote to his members on 22nd May

"I have to suggest that the fact that a Memorandum has been arrived at with the 51 Engineering Unions (other than the AEU) will form a strong point in argument to secure a considerable increase in the number of men, being members of the various Unions including the AEU, to resume work under the terms offered by the Employers." (138)

The unions were aware of this threat, and met on 24th May, to try to get a local agreement to stay together. On the 23rd May Leckie had urged a decision

"To show whether, in spite of what the Executives might say, the unions of Coventry intended to maintain that solidarity which had been evidenced during the recent dispute." (139)

This was achieved, at least on paper. A meeting of the full District Committees of the fifteen unions involved in the Coventry area decided

"That no settlement of the Dispute be accepted in this District unless the terms are satisfactory to all the Unions involved." (140)

Feeling the dispute slipping away from them, the AEU DC decided that all-out aggression was the only resort. A motion was brought before an aggregate meeting to widen the dispute:

"That our delegates to National Conference be instructed to press that all our members including public services (except Hospitals) be withdrawn from all shops in the United Kingdom." (141)

It also wanted the existing war bonus consolidated in the basic rates, a very unrealistic demand at that time. Orrell was unhappy with the motion, though at the aggregate meeting he refused to say he supported it or opposed it. An amendment that the union abide by the decision of the forthcoming conference was beaten by a two to one majority. Another motion, to have the dispute closed as soon as possible, was ruled out of order, but it showed that there were some people who were all for getting back to work. Nevertheless, the aggregate meeting,

which was held on 31st May, claimed an attendance of 6,000 AEU members, which suggests that the large majority of AEU members were still out.⁽¹⁴²⁾ The motion that the Coventry delegates took to the National Conference stood no chance of getting accepted, for the union had virtually run out of money and could not afford to widen the dispute. On May 27th it decided to end all payments of benefit except to sick and superannuated members, and this must have been another factor in encouraging men to go back. The Rugby AEU, in opposition to Coventry, instructed its delegates at the National Conference to support the decisions of the other unions, and if they decided to call the dispute off, they felt that the AEU should do the same. Their spokesman criticised the Coventry decision in the local press.⁽¹⁴³⁾

The day after the aggregate meeting, a more down to earth incident showed the state of morale of the locked-out workers. The Lockout Committee minutes recorded that "Bro. Newgreen is in a state of nervous collapse and cannot carry on his work as Chief picket," while there was a report of the "serious position" at the Deasy, and non-union labour being driven into the Humber in lorries.⁽¹⁴⁴⁾ The next day there was a report of a meeting of Hotchkiss workers that had agreed to resume work, of more AEU men going back at the Standard Canley plant, while the DC was informed that the B.T.H. management was sending out batches of letters signed by AEU members to the workforce urging a return.⁽¹⁴⁵⁾ This was the last report of attempts by the Committee to keep up meaningful pickets.

Even at this stage, while it could be said that there were serious gaps in the ranks and defeat was virtually inevitable, the majority of AEU members were staying together and obeying the instructions of their

local leaders. But then occurred two events that turned defeat into disaster. On the 2nd of June most of the other unions decided to return to work. The AEU, the Boilermakers, and the Foundry Workers were left on their own. On the day the other workers went back to work, the AEU EC decided to call a ballot of their members to find if they were willing to carry on with the struggle, and Brownlie, the President of the union, publicly urged members to vote for an end to the stoppage and an acceptance of the employers' terms. It could be argued that this was inevitable, at least as seen from Head Office, but it persuaded many workers, who needed little persuasion, that the ballot would be a foregone conclusion, and therefore they went back to work alongside the members of the other unions, prior to the announcement of the result of the ballot.

Local AEU officers and activists were furious, but could do little.

The DC passed a motion to

"Strongly condemn the action of Brother Brownlie in recommending acceptance as likely to demoralise our members." (146)

while the Lockout Committee felt that the other unions had broken their agreement that all Coventry unions would wait for a common settlement, and so ended the Joint Executive Lockout Committee. From about 6th June, men began to return in large numbers. An aggregate meeting was held on the 7th and agreed to hold out - "The meeting closed in perfect order and apparent harmony" - but on the same day the DC heard of branch secretaries and branch officers taking their men back en masse.⁽¹⁴⁷⁾ The Lockout Committee was reduced to passing a motion hoping that no members of its committee would go back prematurely. The ballot showed a large majority in favour of acceptance of the management terms, and the lock-out officially ended on 14th June.

Just as Coventry appears to have been unusual in having had such lively pickets and demonstrations, and in uniting strikers and unemployed, so it was unusual in seeing such a scramble back to work on the part of AEU members in the ten days before the official end of the dispute. According to the President of the Employers' Association, the situation in Coventry compared to other districts was "exceedingly good." (148)

The final mistake of the union was the attempt to discipline those members who went back before 14th June. The AEU DC drew up a scale of penalties:

"Defaulters up to 3 June to be excluded
Members returning June 5,6,7,8, fined £2
Members returning June 9,10, fined £1
Members returning June 12 and 13, fined 10/-
Apprentices to be censured only. " (149)

On top of this, members who encouraged others to go back were to be suspended from various benefits, depending on the circumstances, while those who refused to reply to summonses from the DC were to be fined 5/- in addition. But members who had borne thirteen weeks without wages and had been decisively beaten were in no position or inclination to be fined, and the action of the DC amounted to striking as hard a blow against the union as the employers had done.

Nevertheless, the DC was intent on its policy of discipline. It tried to have excluded all branch officers who went back early, but this was outside its powers and a matter for the union EC, which refused to support it. The DC protested

"As in the near future more bitter fights with the employers are certain, the maintenance of discipline until the end is absolutely necessary and cannot be maintained if the Officers of the Society cannot be relieved upon to maintain that discipline in a personal sense." (150)

A motion that unless the EC allow the DC to expel these officers the DC should resign was defeated by 11 votes to 10; clearly there was a strong school of thought on the DC which put discipline first and the interests of the union as a whole second.

It appears that the discipline programme broke down under the apathy of the membership. There was also active opposition; the DC had to consider a situation

"Of Branch secretaries failing to send any returns of defaulting members and boasting that they did not intend to do so." (151)

It was clear that some branch secretaries had left the union; in September 14 of them had failed to send any reports to the union General Office, so presumably the DC did not have complete records of defaulters. The minute books show that notwithstanding this, some 2,627 members were dealt with for defaulting at one time or another during the lock-out.⁽¹⁵²⁾ It is possible that the large majority of these had failed only to the extent of going back a few days or a week early, but it is also possible, and indeed likely under the circumstances, that the majority left the union rather than pay the fines. At the end of the year membership was down to 5,388 effective members plus 1,350 unemployed, sick and superannuated.⁽¹⁵³⁾ This compared with 11,314 a year earlier. Attempts to discipline foremen met with very little success, for nearly all of them refused to attend DC meetings when called or to pay fines.

The end of the lock-out was the turning point in the fortunes for the AEU, for it began a prolonged loss of membership and importance. In December 1922 the DC decided to invest some of its small funds in photographs of the membership of the DC "As a memento of the past abnormal year

in the history of Trade Unionism in this District."⁽¹⁵⁴⁾ The photograph recorded the end of craft unionism on a mass basis in the city. 1922 saw the last attempt at effective trade union action for engineers in the District for many years. Although trade improved from 1923 onwards a combination of victimisation on the part of the employers and disenchantment on the part of many engineers combined to send membership figures down to a small fraction of the 1920 membership. By August 1923 membership was 4,233, and by the beginning of 1925 it was 3,035, and it remained below this figure for almost every month of the following nine years.⁽¹⁵⁵⁾

A major casualty of the lock-out was the shop stewards' movement. There were widespread complaints from a number of different unions that many firms victimised active trade unionists by refusing to take them back to work, and it is true that it took several months for the bulk of locked out workers to get their jobs back, as employers told them that trade conditions did not allow for them to be taken back. A number of complaints went to the Employers' Association, but this body gave a classic example of how to shelter behind procedure. It claimed it could not take up and investigate a claim of victimisation unless this was first made by the worker concerned to his own employer. But as the worker had been dismissed by his employer, or not re-engaged, he was in no position to use procedure for it did not cover ex-employees. As a result, the Employers' Association refused to recognise the existence of victimisation.⁽¹⁵⁶⁾

Once it was clear that employers had been able to keep many shop stewards out of the factories there was very little likelihood of new stewards coming forward. The shop stewards movement ceased to exist for just over a decade. The Workers Union was in an even worse position, and its stewards disappeared as well. Effective workshop organisation became limited to a

handful of unions such as the Patternmakers, Sheet Metal Workers and Vehicle Builders, whose membership was not greatly affected by the lock-out.

The situation could have been worse, for shortly after the lock-out, attempts were made, possibly by both workers and employers, to finish off the AEU for good and to substitute a "non-political" body in its place. It was reported to the DC that ex-members of the AEU were trying to set up another union; the chairman of the DC stating "That it was common knowledge in the town that a new Society was being formed." The DC was able to interview some of the people concerned, and one told them

"That the proposed Society was to be confined to the Engineering Industry but he understood it to be a sick and dividend Society, the idea of a new trade union having gone west." (157)

An attempt to register a new union with the Registrar of Friendly Societies failed, and the new sick and dividend society did not flourish. Employers may well have been the instigators of this scheme, for just after the end of the lock-out the Executive of the CDEEA discussed the situation;

"The Secretary suggested that the present was an opportune time for considering a scheme for engineering workers somewhat on the lines of the FMBS (Foreman's Mutual Benefit Society) so their interests might be safeguarded against (a) unemployment, (b) incapacity, and (c) old age, or in other words the provision of ordinary friendly society benefits by a Union supported by the Employers without any political interests whatever." (158)

The fact that an attempt was made to put such a society into existence suggests that there were some employers concerned to see the complete collapse of the AEU in the city and its replacement by a benevolent Society. However, there is no evidence that the CDEEA took any definite action or a common position on this, and it is unlikely that the employers would want to make such attempts to completely eradicate the AEU when the lock-out

had given them all they wanted and established them in a strong and dominant position. In earlier discussions, the Executive of the CDEEA had consistently denied that it was trying to smash trade unionism, and it was aware of the benefits to employers of having trade union officers to negotiate with in the event of a dispute, rather than have to deal with local rank and file leaders.⁽¹⁵⁹⁾ Nevertheless, if it wanted unions to survive, it wanted them as weak as possible, and were extremely gratified by the outcome of the lock-out.

The lock-out had dealt a severe blow to all engineering unions, and to the AEU in particular. However, it does appear that the defeat was disproportionately heavy in Coventry and the consequences in terms of effective trade unionism particularly severe. This was partly due to the good organisation, attention to detail, and united front shown by the local employers, and their unity contrasted with the divisions and disunity on the side of the unions. Coventry employers stood to gain a lot from a successful outcome, and may have prosecuted the lock-out more vigorously than employers in other areas.

The lack of unity and preparation shown by the unions, particularly the AEU, must have contributed to the defeat, but this may not have been vital, as the existence of separate bodies running the dispute, while it exposed clearly a lack of unity, existed because forces like the unemployed movement and the left were strong enough at the time to have a significant impact, and the work of the Joint Council prevented the struggle from crumbling earlier than it would have done.

More specific features of the struggle in Coventry were the very high level of unemployment in Coventry coupled with fears for the future of the motor industry. The city had seen short lived booms in industry, and had also seen industries such as ribbon making and cycle making lost to the

city, so it was possible for employers and the local press to exploit the fear that trade union militancy would drive out the motor industry as well.

The newness of much of Coventry's industry, with the rapid expansion of the industrial base in the war meant that the city also had a new and inexperienced labour force and labour movement. Workers had come from all over the country to find work in Coventry, often from outside the engineering industry, and some remained on after the war. But even for skilled workers the city had no sort of tradition of collective militancy that would be able to sustain it in a prolonged encounter with employers. The only other major disputes in the city in engineering had been the strike for shop steward recognition in 1917 and the embargo strike in 1918, in the peculiar circumstances of the war where it was clear to all that whatever the outcome of the strikes they would not be allowed to last as long as the 13 weeks of the AEU lock-out. The traditions of struggle in the city were mainly confined to craftsmen and concerned almost exclusively with local battles either for the district rate or for higher piece-work prices. Because of the small scale nature of the industry up to about 1910, and because of the multiplicity of shops and skills after 1910, and the early acceptance of piece-work, the craft tradition produced small scale disputes, boycotts, works to rule, and local action at shop level. There was no tradition of large numbers of workers, either as a class or as a craft engaging in struggles that cut across the different factories. Thus in 1922 the city's trade unionists had no experience of the sort of struggle they needed to win in such difficult circumstances.

The years 1917 to 1922 had seen tremendous changes in the labour movement in Coventry, the most significant of which was the development

of a body of hundreds of activists, either as branch secretaries, DC members or shop stewards. For the most part, stewards failed to meet the demands of the lock-out, particularly when it came to the organising of pickets. This was a reflection on the immaturity of the shop steward movement as a whole. Most stewards had only a few years experience, and that was confined to their own shops. There were few active workshop committees, and no autonomous local organisation. As we have seen, leadership of the shop stewards remained at first with the CEJC, and as this lost influence, with the different DCs. The practice of holding stewards meetings under the auspices of the CEJC seems to have died out after the war, and meetings, if any were held, were under the auspices of different unions. Even the most organised union, the AEU, neglected its stewards movement after the war. By 1922 the stewards in many instances were unable to run effective pickets at their own workplaces.

Had there been a strong trade union leadership at district level the limitations of the shop steward movement would not have been so important, but the history of the CEJC was one of splits and disagreements, and although various federations continued throughout the 1920s and 30s they were no longer an important centre of power, any more than the Trades Council was after the outbreak of war. No union body in Coventry could surmount the problem of the AEU nationally following a different policy to that of other engineering unions. The formation of the AEU did create a strong union in the city, but in 1920 it was strong on paper only, and still hostile to the WU. The AEU was a focus for militancy after the war, and the DC was prepared to give a lead on struggles against employers, but within an increasingly unrealistic craft framework which could countenance the disastrous step of driving thousands of workers out of the union because they

were regarded as having failed it. The lock-out brought out the worst in the AEU for it resurrected the tradition of fighting a dispute by forcing the membership to individually take a stand, by neglecting organisation, by having distant relations with other parties in the dispute, and by punishing its own members but not the employers. In an engineering city like Coventry, the lock-out was virtually a division of the city into opposing classes, but although some of the AEU DC were well aware of this, only the revolutionaries argued for organisation on broad class lines.

Thus the particular severity of the defeat in Coventry in 1922 had much to do with the existence of a new, inexperienced trade union movement in a centre of advanced engineering, and the failure of the movement to provide the organisation and leadership needed to survive a difficult economic situation. This situation was a reflection of the general immaturity of the labour movement in the city, and not just an industrial weakness. The city's labour traditions had more or less started from scratch with the engineering industry, and their development had been hampered by the uneven and peculiar nature of that industry together with the social composition of the city.

Even in the 1920s there were still a large number of small specialist workshops in Coventry. They existed alongside big factories, which had generated a need for small specialist producers, and stimulated the growth of small workshops, and there was always the prospect of small workshops developing rapidly into big ones. Thus there was an avenue out of wage labour and into independent production or servicing, although this escape route became more hazardous as the years went by. Inside the factories, particularly the medium sized ones, there was scope for a skilled man to

become a foreman or technical worker, and we have seen the importance the employers attached to foremen as instruments of influence over workers. There was thus a route into positions of influence away from the struggles over piece rates, and this plus the dream of independent workshops were important factors in taking experience away from the trade union movement, and, perhaps more importantly, creating expectations that were at odds with the need for unity and solidarity.

At the same time Coventry was still close to rural life.⁽¹⁶⁰⁾ It was not part of a major industrial conurbation, but an isolated industrial centre which served as a magnet for workers from Warwickshire, Leicestershire, and Northamptonshire. Many of the new jobs that had been created before and during the war were filled by new workers, new to engineering and to trade unionism, and without the background in industrial work that would serve to strengthen trade union traditions. The seasonal nature of the engineering trades in the city prolonged the link between town and country, for workers could try to take jobs in rural areas during lay offs, or return to their families. The period of greatest inactivity in the motor industry, and the time of extended holidays when work was short was co-incidental with the harvest season in rural areas. This link with the country meant that in 1922 there were some workers in the city still in the process of adaptation to urban industrial life, people who were unlikely to understand the importance of the managerial functions dispute. In 1921 the population of Coventry was 50% greater than it had been twenty years earlier, while the population of Foleshill grew by over 44% in ten years.⁽¹⁶¹⁾ Some of this increase, though it is impossible to say how much, was due to migration from the rural areas close at hand.

The city was full of young people. The average age of men and women

in Coventry in 1921 was 29 years; it was even lower in Foleshill - 26. There were twice as many men in the age bracket 15 to 19 as were in the bracket 50 to 54. The majority of men and women were unmarried.⁽¹⁶²⁾ The large numbers of single young people present in the city may well have been a source of strength to bodies like the CUWC, but it also meant that the labour movement was lacking in experience and there was the danger that unions and the Labour Party would be too dominated by older trade unionists, out of touch with young people. The AEU and the WU seemed to have avoided this danger, but the average age of the DC of the AEU was about 40, and although this was probably lower than in most other AEU Dcs, it was still significantly higher than the average age in the city. The existence of such a large proportion of young people in Coventry was not unrelated to the emergence of a group of young revolutionaries and trade union militants, but their lack of experience may well have been another factor in explaining their tendency to over-estimate revolutionary potentials.

The lack of maturity of the labour movement was shown by the weakness of the Labour Party in this period, as shown in the previous chapter. With little working class political activity in the city, workers were much more likely to be influenced by the local press and local leaders, as well as the national opinion formers. As the local press was hostile to Labour and suspicious of trade unionism, its influence worked against the interests of the labour movement.

In some circumstances, a confrontation like the lock-out could lead to a rapid change in outlook on the part of working people, and a sudden development of ideas of class struggle and militancy. But in Coventry the lock-out took place after several years of acute depression and falling prices, with employers having time to prepare the groundwork carefully, with

an eye to exploiting differences in the workforce, and following a year of retreat by the unions. In such circumstances it was not surprising that the conflict brought the latent weaknesses in the labour movement out.

The lock-out and its aftermath of victimisation and loss of union membership was a heavy defeat for labour in Coventry. Between 1917 and 1922 there was some tension within the trade union movement between what were broadly two schools of thought; those that for the most part accepted the trade unions as they found them and accepted the leading role of the different District Committees and Executives, and those who were influenced by the Soviet Union and wished to construct a new trade union movement based on Workers' Committees, and the shop stewards' movement. Although the second school of thought was weak in Coventry, the tension could be considerable, as the confrontation between Leckie and Givens at the AEU DC meeting in the lock-out showed. Although both sides could be negative, the general opposition of the two views was valuable in developing political and trade union policies and practice. The lock-out, however, meant the end of ideas of direct action, the end of the shop stewards and workers' committees as viable bodies, and the end of the claims of the revolutionaries to represent a significant section of the labour movement. The collapse of the revolutionary alternative can be seen in the collapse of the early Communist Party in Coventry. Emery had already left the city, and had to flee the country, going to the Soviet Union. Leckie left soon after the lock-out, to become a Party functionary in London. Dingley, one of the oldest of the group, suffered a virtual physical and mental breakdown after the extreme exertions of the previous six years, while Jackson had to leave the area in an attempt to find work. Some drifted out of the Party because of disagreements in policy, while others, such as Thompson and

and Cresswell, made names for themselves in the Labour Party. Not everyone left, but the Party went into a decline that reflected the decline in the fortunes of the left in the trade union movement.

Thus the unreformed traditional trade union movement survived, and some of the features that the revolutionaries had attacked were strengthened. With the collapse of workplace power, what influence there was left in the unions became concentrated on the District Committees, and the full time officials who serviced them. The focus of power in the unions moved outside the factories, and unions became more remote and less relevant to shop floor workers. This development was encouraged by employers, who would hold any number of local meetings, but would oppose attempts to strengthen unionism at work.

Removed from the workshops, the AEU DC remained trapped with its craft outlook in isolation. The new machine tools that went into the workshops after 1922 were worked by men with few or no skills, but without a workshop movement the AEU DC could avoid the implications of this. As a result it was slow to shed exclusive attitudes in the revival of the unions in the 1930s.

The relationship between the Labour Party and the unions changed as well. From being the minor partner, the Labour Party quickly established itself as the major partner, in terms of winning new votes and members in the late 1920s while the unions were still losing members. The links between the two sides of the movement became weaker, with the Party slowly building up its own core of leadership that was separate from the leadership in the unions. While there was always an overlapping of personnel between the two sides, this became less strong as time went by, or rather trade unionists who became active in the Labour Party found they were likely to

have to curtail their trade union activity. As the trade unions had stifled the growth of the Party there was obviously some benefit in this change of relationship, but the change was from a relationship that stifled the Party to one that threatened to stifle the unions, or at least made it possible for the Party to grow and formulate a policy for Coventry, without reference to the mass of trade unionists, and in the absence of a dynamic industrial movement. This separation of industrial and political struggle meant that both sides saw limits to their actions and narrow views about their roles.

FOOTNOTES

Post-war Industrial Struggles

1. Graham Turner, The Car Makers, (1964) p.21.
2. W.B. Stephens, op.cit. p.182.
3. Armstrong-Siddeley Motors, op.cit. p.75.
4. P.W.S. Andrews, and Elizabeth Brunner, The Life of Lord Nuffield, (Oxford, 1955) p.99.
5. G. Oliver, The Rover, (1971) p.77.
6. Andrews and Brunner, op.cit. p.127.
7. WU Annual Reports, 1919 and 1921.
8. R. Hyman, The Workers' Union, (1971), p.149.
9. Coventry Trades Council, Annual Report 1919.
10. AEU District Committee Minutes, 13th September 1920.
11. " " " " 16th March 1921.
12. M.D.T. 6th January 1919.
13. " 10th January 1919.
14. " 13th January 1919.
15. Sir Alfred Herbert, evidence submitted and published in appendix to the Atkins Report, Women in Industry 1918-1919, (1919).
16. M.D.T. 3rd February 1919.
17. AEU District Committee Minutes, 7th February 1919.
18. M.D.T. 1st January 1919.
19. " 8th February 1919.
20. " 11th February 1919.
21. " 14th February 1919.
22. AEU District Committee Minutes, 23rd September 1919.
23. " " " " 20th Septemder 1919.
24. " " " " 26th July 1920.

25. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 20th September 1920.
26. AEU District Committee Minutes, 2nd October 1920.
27. " " " " 10th October 1920.
28. " " " " 16th November 1920.
29. " " " " 2nd December 1919.
30. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 6th December 1920.
31. " " " " 17th January 1921.
32. AEU District Committee Minutes, 23rd December 1920.
33. " " " " 31st January 1921.
34. " " " " 21st December 1920.
35. " " " " 22nd February 1921.
36. M.D.T. 23rd February 1921.
37. AEU District Committee Minutes, 28th February 1921.
38. ibid.
39. Solidarity, 4th March 1921.
40. AEU District Committee Minutes, 6th March 1921.
41. " " " " 11th April 1921.
42. Engineering and Allied Employers' National Federation, Decisions of Central Conference, 1898-1925, (1926) p.108.
43. AEU District Committee Minutes, 12th April and 19th April 1921.
44. " " " " 30th April and 12th June 1921.
45. " " " " 14th June 1921.
46. " " " " 15th June 1921.
47. " " " " 21st June 1921.
48. " " " " 24th June and 28th June 1921.
49. " " " " 18th September and 15th November 1921.
50. " " " " 20th December 1921.
51. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 30th May 1921.

52. 1918 Apprenticeship Indentures of Alf Hicken, UPA member.
53. ASE District Committee Minutes, 17th June 1919.
54. " " " " 24th February 1919.
55. " " " " 16th March and 4th May 1920.
56. Engineering and Allied Employers' National Federation, op.cit p.107.
57. ASE District Committee Minutes, 7th October 1919.
58. ASE Monthly Journal and Report, August 1919.
59. ASE District Committee Minutes, 4th May 1920.
60. AEU District Committee Minutes, 14th September 1920.
61. Interview with Cyril Taylor. Taylor went on to become convenor at the BTH in the 1930s, and was elected AEU District Secretary after the death of Givens in 1940.
62. ASE District Committee Minutes, 20th April 1920.
63. AEU District Committee Minutes, 20th September 1920.
64. AEU Shop Stewards Meetings, Minutes, 30th November 1921.
65. " " " " " 18th February 1921.
66. " " " " " 8th March 1921.
67. Cab., PRO GT24 Reports, 27th January 1921. Solidarity, 11th February 1921.
68. Solidarity, Vol. 5 No. 1, January 1921.
69. Branko Pribicevic, The Shop Stewards' Movement and Workers' Control 1910-1922 (Oxford 1959) p.104.
70. ASE District Committee Minutes, 16th July and 22nd July 1919.
71. " " " " 18th November and 25th November 1919.
72. AEU District Committee Minutes, 6th December 1921.
73. " " " " 7th February 1922.
74. " " " " 7th March 1922.
75. AEU Shop Stewards Meetings, Minutes, 8th February 1922.
76. " District Committee Minutes, 2nd March 1922.
77. " " " " 6th March 1922.
78. " " " " 8th March 1922.
79. " " " " 13th March, 14th March and 15th March 1922.

80. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 2nd January 1922.
81. " " " " 30th January 1922.
82. " " " " 27th February 1922.
83. " " " " 20th March 1922.
84. ibid.
85. Reference mislaid.
86. CDEEA Circular letter 670, 2nd March 1922.
87. "Notes by the Secretary of the Coventry Engineering Employers' Association."
88. AEU District Committee Minutes, 16th May 1922.
89. CDEEA Circular letter 671, 3rd March 1922.
90. " " " 679 10th March 1922.
91. " " " 687 16th March 1922.
92. Letter from Varley to James Brown, Secretary of the EEF, 14th March 1922.
93. AEU District Committee Minutes, 13th March 1922.
94. ibid.
95. AEU District Committee Minutes, 6th April 1922.
96. AEU Lockout Committee Minutes, 29th March 1922.
97. " " " " 8th April 1922.
98. " " " " 12th April 1922.
99. AEU District Committee Minutes, 13th April 1922.
100. AEU Lockout Committee Minutes, 20th April 1922.
101. " " " " 21st April 1922.
102. AEU District Committee Minutes, 21st April 1922.
103. AEU Lockout Committee Minutes, 24th April 1922.
104. M.D.T. 26th April 1922.
105. Document "D" attached to letter from Varley to Milburn, 18th April 1922.
106. Letter from Varley to Milburn, 18th April 1922.
107. CDEEA Circular letter 720, 24th April 1922.

108. M.D.T. 4th May 1922.
109. M.D.T. 3rd May 1922.
110. ibid.
111. M.D.T. 5th May 1922.
112. M.D.T. 6th May 1922.
113. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 5th May 1922.
114. ibid.
115. CDEEA Circular letter 733, 1st May 1922.
116. " " " 683 11th March 1922.
117. M.D.T. 16th May 1922.
118. " 17th May 1922.
119. " 23rd May 1922.
120. " 24th May 1922.
121. " 26th May 1922.
122. CDEEA Circular letter 724, 25th April 1922.
123. M.D.T. 10th May 1922.
124. ibid.
125. M.D.T. 18th May 1922.
126. M.D.T. 17th May 1922.
127. " 31st May 1922.
128. AEU Monthly Journal and Report, July 1922.
129. AEU District Committee Minutes, 13th June 1922.
130. CDEEA Circular letter 738, 8th May 1922.
131. ibid.
132. AEU Lockout Committee Minutes, 16th May 1922.
133. " " " " 8th May 1922.
134. AEU District Committee Minutes, 30th May 1922.
135. " Lockout Committee Minutes, 16th May 1922.

136. AEU Lockout Committee Minutes, 25th May 1922.
137. " " " " 31st May 1922.
138. CDEEA Circular letter 752, 22nd May 1922.
139. M.D.T. 23rd May 1922.
140. AEU District Committee Minutes, 24th May 1922.
141. " " " " 30th May 1922.
142. " " " " 31st May 1922.
143. M.D.T. 2nd June 1922.
144. AEU Lockout Committee Minutes, 1st June 1922.
145. " " " " 2nd June 1922 and AEU District Committee, 6th June 1922.
146. AEU District Committee, Minutes, 6th June 1922.
147. " " " " 7th June 1922.
148. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 12th June 1922.
149. AEU District Committee Minutes, 29th June 1922.
150. " " " " 15th August 1922.
151. " " " " 5th September 1922.
152. " " " " 12th September and 27th September 1922.
153. " " " " 16th January 1923.
154. " " " " 5th December 1922.
155. AEU District Committee membership records.
156. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 3rd July and 24th July 1922.
157. AEU District Committee Minutes, 5th September 1922.
158. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 12th June 1922.
159. " " " " 24th April 1922.
160. An interesting description of the looseness of Coventry rural life can be found in the novel by Richard Hughes, The Wooden Shepherdess, 1917, particularly chapters 23 and 35.
161. Census of England and Wales, 1921, Occupational Table Two.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Unions in Defeat

This chapter covers the years after the lock-out and before the revival of trade unionism. It shows what employers were able to achieve once union strength had been broken, and how changes in workplace production methods served to push unions into isolation and minority representation. It also deals with the General Strike and its aftermath in Coventry, and the self imposed isolation of the Communist Party from the official trade union movement. This isolation of the left occurred while the Labour Party was emerging as the dominant force in the labour movement.

I Non-union Workshops

At the end of the Lock-out the AEU District Committee had insisted on "the maintenance of discipline until the end,"⁽¹⁾ and had thereby hastened that end by encouraging thousands of its members to desert the union rather than pay the fines imposed on them. In August 1922 the District Committee came within one vote of resigning en mass/in protest at the alleged failure of the Executive Council to deal firmly enough with defaulting strikers.⁽²⁾ But in January 1924 the Committee agreed to press the EC to treat the fines that had been levied on excluded members as arrears, in order that they could be paid off in instalments, as an incentive for men to rejoin the union.⁽³⁾ This period marked the reluctant acceptance of the DC of the new constraints that operated.

The end of the lock-out was the signal for thousands to leave the union, and this desertion continued in large numbers for several years afterwards. Whole branches disappeared, and as a result estimates of

union membership for 1922 are suspect. A number of figures were issued in 1923 which showed that the alarming fall in membership was continuing. In February of that year Givens reported that membership had fallen from nearly 14,000 in July 1920 to 5,900 and that half of that loss had occurred in the previous nine months.⁽⁴⁾ Nationally, the union had lost 30 per cent of its membership, but in Coventry the loss was 57 per cent. This seemed bad, but membership figures for the next few months were substantially lower and suggest that either there was another sudden outflow which was unlikely as there was no serious dispute on at the time, or that the figures were being reassessed more realistically. In any case, by August 1923 the figure given was 4,233.⁽⁵⁾ Membership kept declining throughout that year and the next, and by the beginning of 1925 was down to 3,035 and went below 3,000 a few months later. It then stabilised at or below this figure, representing a loss of 80 per cent from the time of amalgamation in 1920.⁽⁶⁾

The implication of this collapse in membership was that trade union activity was disappearing from most parts of the factories. Union membership was confined to a small minority, and effective organisation either non-existent or in small pockets. In 1925 the District Committee interviewed a number of union members to find out conditions in the workplaces, itself an indication of the union's weakness. Organisation was shown to be in a sorry state. At the Triumph Cycle Company less than 5 per cent of the workers were union members. At Maudslay Motor Company membership was 8 out of 60 in the Fitting shop and 6 out of 60 in the Machine shop. At Swift 85 per cent of the Toolroom was unionised, but organisation was very weak in the rest of the factory. At Coventry Gauge and Tool, membership was 10 out of 140. At the Rover, half of the Toolroom were members, but there were only 3 in the Fitting shop.⁽⁷⁾ Other reports were similar but in a number of small and a few large factories there was virtually no membership,

and no one prepared to report. The shop stewards movement, weak in 1922, had all but disappeared. In October 1922 the DC put the best face on it by resolving

"That we revert to the old system of shop stewards and appoint such from the membership in the various shops, without in any way notifying the employers upon the matter." (8)

This was setting the clock back to pre-war days, and as then, with a few exceptions even this system did not work effectively.

Membership figures for the Workers Union in Coventry do not exist, but it is likely that it was at least as hard hit. In the West Midlands as a whole the union lost ninety per cent of its membership in the 1920s.⁽⁹⁾ By contrast, the smaller craft unions fared much better. The Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, which had only a few hundred members in the city, did not lose members in the early 1920s, and gained a few towards the end of the decade.⁽¹⁰⁾ The National Union of Vehicle Builders saw a slight decline in 1922/3, but membership rose in the mid-1920s. About five per cent of total union membership was in Coventry, which always had the largest branch in the country. In April 1923 it was reported that there had been a "Large influx of new men" which "has given the branch much anxiety" which suggests that some defaulters from the AEU were trying to switch to the NUVB.⁽¹¹⁾ The Birmingham Sheet Metal Workers Society which only had two large branches, one in Birmingham and one in Coventry, lost a few hundred members in 1922 but made them up within a year. It was still able to maintain some small closed shop areas throughout the 1920s.⁽¹²⁾

Because the AEU and the WU aspired to organise across the city they were more widely stretched and more vulnerable to attack. They depended on large numbers of members to be effective and the loss of a certain proportion

of membership in a workplace, by making the unions ineffective, encouraged many others to drop out. The AEU was mainly craft-membership, and could survive better than the WU, but in the mid 1920s its membership was only a few hundred more than the NUVB. The employers' onslaught had led to many people leaving the unions, but while coercion and victimisation undoubtedly existed, it would be wrong to conclude that the weakness of the unions was an indication that life in the factories had become much harder.

Despite the decline in the unions between the lock-out and the general strike, there is no evidence to show that there was a widespread attack upon wages. The national reductions were imposed, but may well have been made up by increased piece-work production. There is also no evidence of a widespread attack on working conditions, though this happened at some places. An AEU member giving evidence to the DC in November 1923 said of the toolroom

"It was dangerous to talk in the shop and he knew very few of our members there as it appeared to him that they could not trust one another and therefore they were very secretive..."

Questioned as to the conditions in the production shops, he replied that he understood that they were very bad. The piece-work prices fixed by the firm were such that many men were badly in debt, and in some cases £10 to £12 debt was shown on the tickets." (13)

A report from Sterling Metal in 1925 claimed that "the foreman used the whip all round." Most of the reports, however, were conspicuous for the absence of complaints about bullying, harassment or bad working conditions. (14)

The report from the production shops at Triumph Cycle stressed the "complete absence of bullying by the foremen and the shop was much more go as you please in character than most shops." At Maudslay conditions were "fairly easy", at Rover conditions were "good", at Lea & Francis "fairly comfortable," while no complaints were made in a number of other reports. (15) What the reports did show was that moderately high wages were being earned in a

number of places. Despite poor or non-existent union organisation, the large majority of skilled workers were getting at least the District rate, and often through piece-work and bonus substantially more. The extension of piece-work meant that the district rate was often irrelevant. In 1925 the district rate for a skilled man should have been 56s a week.⁽¹⁶⁾ In some places the hourly rates paid to workers were well below this, but the piece-work earnings were well above. The Triumph Cycle Co. seems to have been particularly well paid, for the report from there stated

"The rates paid to Machinists were abnormally low, men of 23 or 25 being rated at 6d but their earnings under the piece-work system were up to £5. Boys of 17 were earning £3. Drillers were getting £6 to £7, while frame filers were getting from £6 to £10 per week."

However, this may have been a little exceptional, for the reporter went on to warn:

"He did not know what would occur in the future because the Head Rate-fixer had been discharged. There had recently been a 20 per cent reduction in the fitting shop but the men were still earning the same." ^{said} (17)

The report^{said} that the toolsetters were on time rates, and although being paid above the district rate, and getting a bonus, nevertheless were complaining of being worse off than production workers. Although wages were a little lower in most of the other factories to give reports, they were all well above the district rate, except at Sterling Metals. At several factories, toolroom workers got about £4 per week, while production workers could get anything from one-third to over two-thirds on top of the basic rate. The major complaints were not about the level of pay, but about the inconsistencies in rating jobs, and the consequent insecurity.⁽¹⁸⁾ With the union powerless, wages were negotiated either individually or in groups or gangs with the ratefixers and the foremen.

While the degree of coercion and anti-union suspicion should not be

underestimated, it is clear that many employers were, while in a position of strength, providing good working conditions and good wages to their workers, and that this was a big disincentive to become active in the unions. The lock-out in 1922 had had its aim at reducing labour costs, and union interference. This did not mean reducing earnings. The money was there provided workers lifted restrictions on overtime in particular, accepted boys on men's machines, removed output restrictions, allowed semi-skilled men on more jobs, and skilled men to move from department to department. The lock-out had been a defeat for union attempts to restrict management initiatives, but did not lead to a reduction in living standards for those who remained in jobs. Moreover, for nearly all of the period unemployment was low, and at some times there was a shortage of skilled labour. The AEU had a lot of unemployed members throughout 1922, but the number fell quickly in the winter of that year. Orrell reported that January 1923 was the

"Best month for a considerable period, and many of our members who had unfortunately been unemployed for the past two years have secured jobs." (19)

Throughout the year there were several hundred AEU members signing the vacancy book, but in February 1924 Orrell reported:

"Further improvement in trade in this division. Many firms find it impossible to obtain the highest skilled labour, and one hopes that this will be the time for the skilled man to come into his own." (20)

At the beginning of 1925 Orrell was commenting:

"The motor trade in Coventry is as busy as can possibly be, but the worst feature of this business is that one has got to work like a Trojan for seven or eight months and then be idle for the remainder of the year." (21)

A year later he was saying:

"The motor industry has undoubtedly had a most successful year, and at the moment seems to be in a happier position than for some long period. Our unemployment figures appear to be lower than ever." (22)

In these circumstances it might have been thought possible for the unions to regain at least some of their lost members, but as already mentioned, they carried on losing members. The AEU ran a number of special campaigns, but all of them were unsuccessful. The first was in July 1923 when a Back to the Unions week was held. Not a single member rejoined, and Orrell admitted that "there was no real enthusiasm exhibited at the meetings."⁽²³⁾ In June 1924 the National Organiser, Fitton, came to the city and took part in a propaganda fortnight, but reported that

"Much apathy is displayed by the workers towards the AEU, and there are many difficulties in the way of thoroughly organising Coventry District." (24)

The District Committee minutes recorded that "Meetings appeared to have failed through lack of energy on the part of members in getting ex-members to attend."⁽²⁵⁾ The Executive Council of the AEU did grant concessions for a limited period for returning ex-members, but these were not taken up. Further campaigns took place in early 1926, and after the threatened lock-out of engineering workers did not take place in March 1926 Orrell felt he saw signs of change:

"The recent threatened lockout has given a shock to all eligible members, with the result that there has been a remarkable exhibition of common fellowship, an inrush of new members and a revival of a fighting spirit." (26)

This was a considerable exaggeration; only a few dozen workers joined the union. It is probable that the CDEEA assessment of the mood of Coventry workers was more accurate at this date, for it complained against the EEF policy of threatening a lock-out. The representative from Herbert's claimed that because wages in Coventry were higher than in most other centres, workers were satisfied, and as they were not complaining, they should not be faced with a lock-out.⁽²⁷⁾

The conclusion to be drawn from this is that employers had been

successful, through the use of the lock-out, in breaking down what they saw as restrictive labour practices that constituted a barrier to the efficient use of labour and a reduction in costs. Once these restrictive practices had been done away with, wages could be allowed to rise, provided the rises reflected increases in productivity. These individualised and piecemeal increases kept the workforce relatively contented. Moreover, once union restrictions became impossible, there was little incentive to stay in the union, for the imposition of union policy, if possible, would have meant a restriction on wages. Also a developed piecework system meant that workers supervised themselves to a considerable extent, and no bullying and harsh discipline was required. In other words, after the lock-out, some employers saw that a system of high wages and high output was the best way of keeping the unions outside the gates, and the economic conditions of the motor industry meant that this policy took firmest root in Coventry. Thus William Morris, when referring to the acquisition of the Hotchkiss works, wrote "A low wage is the most expensive method of producing. A moderately high wage is the cheapest," (28) while A.P. Young, President of Coventry Liberals, and managing director of BTH at Rugby, also wrote

"High wages, when rightly applied to ensure that value is obtained for the money expenses, is a right and sound principle that is likely to lead to success." (29)

Morris, of course, combined his high wage policy with fierce opposition to unions and the fostering instead of social clubs. The success of the employers after 1922 showed how difficult it was to struggle for the defence of union practices which were not firmly rooted, and the speed with which many workers adjusted to non-union work showed that their commitment to the union had been very limited.

Immediately after the war over-capitalisation and speculation in the motor industry had exacerbated the slump of 1920, but by 1922 car sales were picking up and they grew every year throughout the decade. By 1927 total production of vehicles was three times the 1922 figure.⁽³⁾ The motor trade was still a risky business, but for the companies that survived, prospects were good. Provided that better use of resources allowed the companies to sell at the new low prices, there was a good market and a good profit. Increased production necessitated reorganisation in the factories. There was a move away from organising a factory around the different sorts of machines, to organising it to fit in with the different stages of production. Full mass production was a characteristic of only the very large suppliers of cheap cars in the period before the Second World War, but batch production and the reorganisation to accommodate production on an assembly line basis began in the 1920s, particularly with engines and accessories.⁽³¹⁾ In Coventry, a good example of what could be done by way of increasing production and reorganising the method and system of work was seen when Morris took over the Hotchkiss works. This had changed from armaments to motor engines after the war, and Morris Motors had been its major customer. Morris explained why it was purchased:

"I only buy a concern when they tell me they cannot produce enough of the article in question for our programme. The Hotchkiss Co., for instance, said they could not produce more than 300 engines from their Coventry factory. So I purchased the concern 12 months ago. Already, by replanning the shops, by putting on an extra shift and by saving space everywhere, we have produced 600 engines a week out of the identical cubic space. We are now extending this plant to produce three times this number." ⁽³²⁾

Morris was successful, for by December 1924 the plant was producing 1,200 engines a week, less than two years after the factory had been taken over.

Frank Woollard was the senior engineer responsible for reorganising the works, and he explained the reasons for his success. The major principle was the establishment of continuous or flow production, with as much work as possible being done on the engine within the one building, rather than components being sent to one or more different factories for various processes. This allowed for the planned flow of production:

"The idea of continuous flow must be present from the design and raw material stages up to and even beyond the sales stage." (33)

The layout of the works was arranged round an assembly line for the cylinder blocks which arrived from the foundry. The only time the blocks were manually handled was when they were taken off the lorries. For the rest of their journey round the factory they were on elevators or track, and did not touch the floor. The major new machinery in the factory, which at the time was claimed to be unique, was a cylinder block machine, which was

"An aggregation of simple machines attached to a continuous bed, a continuous table, and a common control shaft to time the 53 different operations." (34)

The cylinder blocks were turned from the castings into completed blocks by the men working the different parts of the machine complex at the rate of one every four minutes. Several sub-assembly lines were geared to the main line. Inspection after each operation was replaced by inspection of the finished product, and this reduced the need for skilled men, as did the abolition of a machine shop. To maximise production, the factory went over to a three shift system, and production went on for about 125 hours a week. Even the mens' "Mess room" was reorganised on a continuous flow system, and a conveyor service of meals established.

Only maintenance and toolroom workers were unaffected by this

reorganisation. Throughout the rest of the factory only semi-skilled labour was required. Much of the work became routine repetition, as Woollard acknowledged:

"Repetitive work can be made more interesting, and one way of doing this is to give the men a change of scene. By changing men round the machines they are not only given a great interest, but they become more useful men, and that is one way in which this matter will probably be tackled... Machine minders with complicated machines develop a real interest in their work, and that helps them." (35)

The factory was free from unionism, and from industrial disputes. Woollard felt that this was due to the way the work was organised;

"Payment by results and honouring unwritten laws between employer and employed, together with reasonably comfortable surroundings, would appear to be the solution of the labour difficulty." (36)

Work satisfaction was likely by the fact "That the hours are short, that the men get plenty of time off and they have plenty of money to spend." Discipline did not have to be strict; the men were allowed to smoke on the job, which was an innovation. Woollard saw the new system of work and payment as creating its own discipline, as this lyrical passage shows:

"Mechanised movement of the work-piece are possibly even more of moral than of physical value, notwithstanding the fact that it is the physical help they give that makes the moral value possible. The mechanised movement is a metronome which beats out time for the whole of the works. It does its work quietly and efficiently without argument or any of the old-time bluster which was, erroneously, supposed to be necessary to activity in the factory. If used wisely, it sets a pace which in itself helps to maintain: it discovers weak spots in the organisation and shows up inequalities in method which, once visible, good management quickly remedy. It is beneficial in redressing injustices to the overworked by urging those who do less than their share." (37)

Thus the workers become the instruments of the machines. It is hard to imagine a description of a workplace that could be more at odds with the traditional craft union view of the skilled worker in his authority in the workplace, and the reorganisation at the Hotchkiss, renamed Morris Engines,

shows why Coventry employers had fought so vigorously to defeat union practices. These practices were not particularly strong in the city, but were still an obstacle to the extension of mass manufacture that was urgently required in the vehicle industry at the time. The Hotchkiss reorganisation is a fairly extreme example of the way things were moving; at the time it was regarded as being in advance of the rest of the industry. But in the next decade, many large scale producers went through a similar reorganisation, in Coventry particularly Armstrong-Whitworth and Armstrong-Siddeley, Standard and Jaguar, while those companies that lacked the resources or the space to follow them (such as Singer and Rover), found themselves in crisis. A few specialist or quality companies, like Daimler, avoided major reorganisation, but even there there were a number of changes in the work method.

For semi-skilled workers new to the industry, the work at companies like Morris Engines had many attractions. Of course, the fact that management arrogated all decisions to itself ensured that there would always be some form of conflict between the workers and the employer, but much of the union concern to protect the rights of skilled workers was irrelevant, while some of it was hostile to the interests of the semi- and unskilled worker. The AEU in particular was out of touch with workplace realities for most of the inter-war period. Its appeal was almost exclusively limited to the shrinking section of industry that constituted skilled men. Thus throughout the 1920s and the early years of the 1930s there were very few semi-skilled members of the union in the city. Not until 1937 did the number of semi-skilled men in the Coventry District overtake the number of skilled, despite the fact that they had been a majority in the workshops for many years before.⁽³⁸⁾ As a consequence, much of the work of the DC of the AEU was

in the form of exhortation rather than organisation. Members were criticised for accepting reductions in piece-work, the introduction of boys and girls, and in particular working in excess of the agreed thirty hours a month overtime. Such criticism was a sign that the DC was finding it difficult to adjust to its new role. One incident gives a good picture of its weakened influence. At a local conference on an application for a wage increase for blacksmiths and strikers in May 1924, the employers' side was able to produce figures on their wages, which appeared to have undermined the union case. The DC, in considering the conference, felt that the different unions involved should have met prior to the conference to discuss the case, but Givens felt that this would not have made much difference:

"Secretary pointed out that our delegates should be instructed by DC but owing to our weakness of organisation and discipline it was impossible to refute the figures of Employers however much discussion took place before the conference." (39)

With the weakness of workshop organisation, however, local conferences took on more importance to the unions. The Employers' Association recognised this, and began a policy of refusing to call conferences where an issue to be discussed had not first been raised by an individual worker with his foreman. This was felt to be important as

"There would in all probability be many local Conferences which would prove to be a sheer waste of time." (40)

So although there were many issues that the unions wished to take up, particularly the increasing use of boys at work, there was a decline in the number of conferences. With less work to do, much time was spent on the DC in internal argument and factionalising. Most of the trouble was between the district secretary and Orrell and the Minority Movement group on the DC. On a number of occasions in 1924 this group felt that Givens

was suppressing motions from branches, and on one occasion the minutes record "The Secretary was again told he was the servant of the Committee and they were not allowing him to decide."⁽⁴¹⁾ When Fitton came to Coventry he "appealed for less personalities and more unity with concentration on problems of the future in preference to disagreements about the past."⁽⁴²⁾ He was not successful, for there were a number of discussions on Minority Movement Conferences that caused dissension. On one occasion, after Thomson and Stokes had been elected as delegates to a conference in London, Givens flatly refused to pay out any travelling expenses as he stated that the Executive Council would not support the use of funds for this purpose.⁽⁴³⁾ Later in the year the DC decided by the Chairman's casting vote not to send delegates to the next Minority Movement Conference. Although the left could sometimes get motions through the DC and aggregate meetings of the AEU, it did not feel strong enough to mount challenges to Givens in his re-election as secretary, or to Metcalfe in his election as District President, in 1924. In 1925 Stokes did stand for the Presidency but came last of three. This apparent weakness seems to have led to a reduction in in-fighting, though this may have been due to the serious political and industrial situation that was developing in the autumn 1925.

II The General Strike

The events in the mining industry that led to "Red Friday" had some impact in Coventry, for the Trades Council set up a Council of Action. After three meetings, and a temporary settlement of the dispute, it went into abeyance, and Coventry trade unionists, like those throughout the rest of the country, found that shortly before the strike was to begin they had to create an organisation from nothing. At least in Coventry some organisation

took place prior to the strike. On 15th April 1926 a joint meeting of unions agreed to call on the Trades Council to re-establish the Council of Action, and a meeting took place on 22nd April which agreed that the Trades Council Executive Committee, together with co-opted union delegates should be the Council of Action. This was immediately put into operation, and a Council of some fifty persons was established with an Executive of about fifteen.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The Labour Party was allowed to have its officials co-opted onto the Council, and Mabbs, Chairman of the Trades Council and of the Labour Party also chaired the Council jointly with Metcalfe of the AEU, while the Trades Council Secretary, Jack Baird a printworker, was the Secretary. Afterwards, the Minority Movement claimed that about 20 members of the Council were MM members, but this may be overstating their influence, for the majority of members of both the whole of the Council and the executive were the leaders of the local union committees and full-time officials.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Trades Council activists such as Baird and Bill Buxton, a leading Communist from the local bus service, also played an important part and the organisation was based on the Trades Council, but by and large the strike locally was run by the existing trade union leadership.

The strike began at midnight on 3rd May, and whatever doubts the Council may have had about the response were soon stilled, as virtually all of the workers in the unions specified by the TUC stopped work. Railway workers, transport workers, printers and building workers stopped in sufficient numbers to ensure a complete halt in all these trades. In addition, the NUVB, Birmingham Sheet Metal Workers, National Union of Coppersmiths, and the National Union of Sheet Metal Workers called their members out from all factories. The Council of Action was pleased with the response, and the first report to the TUC ended with Mabbs writing on Wednesday 5th May

"Everything has moved remarkably well, and the Coventry Trade Unionists are delighted at the action taken by the General Council, and tender its hearty congratulations. Be assured that the Local Disputes Committee will back the General Council till victory is achieved. The only trouble is keeping the men in work." (46)

But in the AEU, the strike began in confusion. On the Monday the DC held an emergency meeting, to consider a telegram from the union's Executive Council, which instructed AEU members to stop work in workplaces where other trade unionists were called out. As the DC did not know which other engineering workers were coming out this was not very helpful, and the only decision made was to call out members working in the Nuneaton railway workshops. The DC felt there would be confusion over the definition of transport workers, which would not normally be taken to include workers engaged in the manufacture of vehicles. However, their members inspected and dispatched finished vehicles in some cases, and a resolution was passed which pointed to another involvement:

"That the Secretary place before National Committee the fact that every firm in Coventry are supplying fleets of cars and lorries to be used for road transport of passengers and goods and to ask that the position be considered and authority given for the closing of the shops." (47)

On the 4th May Givens noted where other unions had had large walkouts, and instructed AEU members in those particular shops to come out. The union members in Armstrong-Whitworth, where the union was a little stronger than most, were also called out, as the aircraft industry was in the first wave. It was clear that engineering unions in the city were determined to take a wide view of the definition of transport workers and turn the strike in the city into a much more general stoppage than was taking place in most other areas. The AEU was also ready for a stoppage, but the local officials insisted that official sanction had to be given.

On Wednesday 5th May, the second day of the strike, about 1,500 AEU members attended an aggregate meeting, where Metcalfe reported on the situation, which had only changed slightly as the UPA had also agreed to stop from that evening. He complained that the DC had "found themselves considerably handicapped by postal delay" and said they had still received no instructions from London. He went on:

"The position created by other unions was of grave concern to the District Committee as we were already being termed a blackleg organisation in view of our apparent lack of support to the Miners, but as approval of the EC must be received before we could stretch the instructions from the Trades Union Congress." (48)

Givens then read out to the meeting the instructions from the TUC, stressing the fact that engineering workers had not been called out, and he "Urged upon the members the absolute necessity for discipline and waiting for approval before any drastic steps were taken."⁽⁴⁹⁾ This appeal fell on deaf ears, for Stokes and Whitely proposed a motion that

"Having considered the position in all its bearings we have come to the conclusion that the manufacture of Motor Vehicles cannot be separated from the question of Transport and therefore we recommend our members to cease work at a time to be fixed." (50)

This was put forward in the name of the DC, so Metcalfe and Givens had already lost the first round of their attempt to put off the strike. An amendment to the above motion was moved from the floor that no action be taken until permission had been given by the EC. In the discussion, "considerable feeling was displayed," but the vote to cease work was passed by 537 to 413, so many members may have left by this point. It was agreed to stop on the next day, and Stokes was sent down to London to explain the position to the EC.

The next day there was a general stoppage of AEU members in Coventry, and a substantial number of non-unionists came out in support as well.

The union vacancy book for that day showed that 1,850 members were signing, together with 332 non-members. By Wednesday 12th May the numbers had risen to 2,307 members and 533 non-members.⁽⁵¹⁾ This was slightly more than three-quarters of the union membership, and it is likely that the figures understate the response, for there was not a great deal of significance in signing the vacant book. The figures must also underestimate the number of non-members out as well, as there was even less logic in their signing the book. The Council of Action was delighted with the response, as their report on the evening of Thursday 6th of May showed:

"99% of AEU men are now out and an astonishing number of non-unionists have also come out. In view of the special feeling locally this is considered by the local Disputes Committee to be specially satisfactory." ⁽⁵²⁾

This was a bit over-optimistic, as was a report by Kingsley Martin and others that was sent to the TUC on May 10th, which spoke of 2,835 AEU members out of 3,000 on strike, for this failed to notice that the figure included 495 non-union members.⁽⁵³⁾ The major source of weakness, however, was the fact that tens of thousands of the city's workers were not in any union and not prepared to stop. Thus there was no stoppage at Dunlop, or Morris, nor at nearly all of the non-motor factories in the city such as Peel-Connor, Courtaulds, and BTH., although it appears that AEU men generally across the city were being encouraged to stop. Moreover, the stoppages were partial at most car factories, with only a small number closing completely. The National Union of Foundry Workers, and possibly one or two other unions stayed at work, but the majority of unions came out. Given the weakness of the unions in the city, the response was much better than could have been reasonably expected.

The AEU DC had a couple of serious problems. On May 6th a deputation of members from the Morris toolroom came to see the committee and pointed

out that there were only 12 out of 130 members there, and that they had been threatened with losing their jobs if they stopped. They asked if there had been definite instructions from the union EC and although there had not been any the DC instructed them to stay out. Nevertheless, the men returned to work the next day.⁽⁵⁴⁾ The union's members at Courtaulds stopped work, but management there claimed that the Warwickshire Miners Association had agreed that women should be kept in work there, as many came from miners' families, and so the DC agreed that a number of men could go back to keep the machines working. However, the central strike committee that had been set up by the Council of Action to co-ordinate picketing refused to permit them back. A few days later, on May 11th, an unofficial meeting of strikers at the factory led to a vote to return to work.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Elsewhere things went smoothly for the Council of Action, and up to the time of the calling off of the strike there were few signs of weakness. Only the electricity undertaking gave some problems, and here again instructions from the TUC were unclear. Electricity was to be cut off for industry, but maintained for domestic purposes, but this was not possible to arrange. The first report from the Council of Action to the TUC stated

"The Electrical Power position is weak. The E.T.U. will come out if called upon. The key position, however, is in the hands of the members of the Electrical Power Engineers, and at the moment the information is that they are antagonistic. Can you do anything with them nationally?" ⁽⁵⁶⁾

Not all ETU members were keen to stop. The leaders of the West Midlands Joint Industrial Council for the industry, which included an ETU man circulated all the workers, pointing out hopefully,

"That as the result of the Industrial Council's work during the past six years much has been accomplished to improve and regularise the relations between employer and employed. Mutually satisfactory rates of pay and conditions of service, including seven days' notice of termination of engagement on either side, have been established.

In our opinion it would be very regrettable if anything should happen that would tend to prejudice the Council's continued existence." (57)

On the evening that this circular appeared, union leaders met the Emergency Sub-Committee of the Council's Electricity Committee. Most of the labourers at the works were in the Workers Union, and George Morris led the union side. He admitted that "It was not quite clear what this definition was with reference to power stations," in dealing with the TUC instructions, but went on to offer that "Labour will be supplied on the definite understanding that it is for lighting hospitals, heating and sanitary purposes," but not for industrial production. The Town Clerk declared that any agreement with the workers to restrict the supply of electricity would be illegal, and so no agreement was reached. (58)

On May 10th, the unions called out all their members, and a mass meeting of the strikers on the 11th resolved that they were still prepared to carry on supplying electricity for domestic consumers, but as this offer had been rejected by the Committee they accepted no responsibility for the dispute and would stay out until the strike was over. (59) The Sub-Committee again rejected this offer, which may not have been practical, and claimed that "The men have struck at the whole principle of Whitleyism, by deliberately violating the conditions of service." (60) This was accompanied by a letter sent to all the strikers saying they would be dismissed if they were not back at work by 13th May, so the principles of Whitleyism had suffered a double blow. An indication of the spirit of the strikers was given by the fact that the resolution to stay out was accepted unanimously, and when Morris was challenged by the Town Clerk on a statement he had made that all men at Birmingham Power Station had walked out whereas in fact some were still at work, he replied

"It should be pointed out that the statement is strictly accurate inasmuch that all Trade Unionists were withdrawn, hence ALL MEN ceased work at the Birmingham Power Station."
(61)

As expected, the members of the EPEA did not go out on strike, so an electricity service continued. Kingsley Martin reported that the power station was only carrying half the normal load due to the strike.(62)

For the rest, the strike in Coventry passed off quietly and efficiently. The Council of Action EC met daily, while the Council itself met on most days. A number of Committees were set up; Transport and Transport Permits, Publications and Publicity, Distress, Social, Meetings, Disputes and Pickets. Coventry was a centre for the distribution of the British Worker for much of the south Warwickshire area, and some of the reports from these areas were sent to London by the Council of Action. The daily ration of the British Worker for the whole of the area was delivered by a motor cyclist from London, and copies were in very short supply. A Coventry Strike Bulletin was issued every day as a supplement, but this was a poorly produced affair on one sheet of paper, and was not produced in great quantities. There was also little local news in it. George Hodgkinson was active on the Publications and Publicity Committee, but it was impossible to overcome all the handicaps associated with lack of preparation at national level.

There was an almost complete stoppage on the railways, buses and trams in the city. Martin noted 5 NUR members and 23 RCA members at work, while pretty well all the bus workers were out. Buxton described how road transport was dealt with:

"Almost every day without fail pickets were posted on guard on all main roads to and from the city. Motor transport was stopped for inspection of travel permits, stamped and endorsed, giving trade union clearance from their depot with that particular load. Without this the transport got no further on its journey, banned by the weight of the trade union solidarity of the strikers to all black transport; such was the mood of these times." (63)

The City Council made no attempt to run the bus service; a few "black" buses (Black Pirates) carried out some journeys, but had no real effect. Picketing went on without interference from the police. Martin reported "good relations with the police. Informal agreement between TU Headquarters and police to keep the peace."⁽⁶⁴⁾ When a bus company in the city offered to run buses for the Corporation the Transport Permit Issues Committee "informed the police authorities of the danger involved by inflaming the workers so the police thought better of it and dropped the whole idea."⁽⁶⁵⁾ Throughout the strike there was only one arrest in the city, of a man advertising the public meetings in the Pool Meadow, and when members of the Council of Action went to the police station he was released without charge.

This lack of violence or clashes with the police was in marked contrast to the 1922 lock-out, particularly as during both disputes there were large public meetings every day in Pool Meadow, with a number of touring speakers and local officials reporting on the development of events, in so far as they knew of any. Some picketing of factories also took place, and Buxton claimed that plans were under way to do something about the Morris Motors factory at the time the strike was called off. Perhaps the Socials Committee kept everyone happy with entertainments, which included cricket matches. A number of concerts took place both in the city and at Rugby, where the secretary of the Trades Council reported,

"We at Rugby are solid. Concerts and massed meetings have absolutely surprised Rugby. I don't think that Rugby will ever get over it." (66)

The strikers' show of strength continued until the ninth day (Wednesday 12th May). The Picket Committee had been finally established on only the previous day, and on the Wednesday the AEU DC reported; "Position

generally more solid." (67) Buxton reported on the calling off of the strike. Ellen Wilkinson was due to speak at a large meeting at Pool Meadow:

"Just when she arrived, before she could address the meeting, a telegram was handed to Bro. Matt Metcalfe the chairman. After calling for silence he read out this extremely important announcement. It just briefly stated 'Strike called off. Return to work tomorrow. Signed Walter Citrine (Acting) Secretary T.U.C.' Immediately following this announcement pandemonium broke out and a great cheer of joy echoed loud over Coventry." (68)

There were three special features about the strike in Coventry. The first was the role of the Co-operative Society and its relations with the strike leaders. The LDR report stated

"No definite arrangements were made with the Co-op but it played a prominent part in the struggle. It placed a car at the disposal of the Council of Action and also gave facilities in the way of duplicating Speakers Notes, supplied copies of verbatim wireless reports, and generally intimated that it would do all possible to meet any demands of the Council of Action." (69)

This is inaccurate as it gives the impression that the Society was wholeheartedly throwing its weight behind the strike. As Chapter Seven shows, at this time there was a struggle going on for the soul of the Society, and this was reflected in its actions during the dispute. Although co-operating with the Council of Action, the officers of the society were aggrieved to find that the strike affected their members as well. It was reluctant to see its employees join the strike, and sent a delegation to Manchester to meet union leaders to get an agreement to keep their members at work. This was not given, and the Society was going to send a delegation to London when the strike ended. (70) Halliwell, as an employee of the Co-op, was chairman of the Permit Issuing Committee, and this allowed the Society to carry on the distribution of food. The

Society played a significant part in keeping prices in the city stable, for at a meeting called by the Food Controller on 3rd May for local tradesmen, it announced that there would be no price increases in food for a fortnight. It also supplied stocks of coal and sold them at the pre-strike price, though in doing this it was merely complying with the Government regulations. It allowed Society members to use credit, and there were no restrictions on the withdrawal of share capital, but members were only allowed to buy a week's supply of food at a time. The Society also allowed the Trades Council to have collecting boxes in its stores for the children of the striking miners.

This suggested a close link between the Society and the Trades Council, but this was resented by the officers of the Society. After the strike, some Conservative and other co-operators, including George Jarrams, who had been the Society's secretary for forty years, attacked what they saw as the Society's generosity, particularly in taking £1,000 out of the reserves and using it as credit for strikers and their families.⁽⁷¹⁾ This provoked Baird, Secretary of the Trades Council to criticise the contribution of the Society:

"We had fought hard for the local Society to reorganise and prepare for the industrial crisis of 1926 - had even interviewed the Management Committee on the matter, but without success. Nationally, a similar state of affairs obtained between the General Council and the Wholesale Society. The onus and responsibility of unpreparedness rested entirely upon the co-operative movement, nationally and locally; and, viewed from the point of view of an industrial struggle only, should have paid the price. But locally, that was not our point of view. Faced with the whole of your transport employees being called upon to cease work (we had the authority to do it, both of the General Council and of their National Executive), your President and Secretary, with other officers of the Society, were early waiting upon us in Much Park Street for permits to be given. Without these permits, not only would local deliveries of bread, milk etc., have ceased, but supplies could not have been secured from London. Your lorries went to London, and our permits took them through the pickets. Our ideas of co-operation saved the Society from a loss impossible to estimate, but undoubtedly considerable." (72)

The conclusion would seem to be that in the event, the Society played an important part in supporting the Council of Action and helping strikers in distress, but because of the disputes that existed within the body its lack of preparation meant that it did not contribute to the struggle as much as it could have done.

A second feature of the strike in the city was the relationship between the City Council and the Council of Action. Throughout the strike Council officials were careful to make no move that would lead to public disorder or provoke those on strike. In practice this meant giving de facto recognition to the Council of Action. As already mentioned, the police had an informal arrangement with the Council, and pickets were not molested in any way. There was no attempt launched to get food to the city, other than through vehicles which were permitted to move by the Council. The food position was kept under review, and halfway through the strike The Town Clerk asked the Council to send three delegates to sit on a "Goods stock review committee" of the City Council. According to Buxton, who was one of the delegates, this committee met,

"To examine data which had been collated on goods available in the City and which were being seriously depleted by this time though it had not begun to show itself in the shops. From facts ascertained it appeared that within a short period of time, had the strike continued beyond the ninth day (its duration) there would have been a crisis of a food shortage in Coventry." (73)

Had the strike lasted longer the City Council might have felt moved to set up a food supply system, but for the duration it was prepared to co-operate with the strikers. Despite the fact that a bus company wanted to open a bus service, the City Council made no attempt to run a service. Nor did it respond to requests to make the police more public and use them to initiate a return to work. After the strike, the Chief Civil Commissioner sent by the Government to run the emergency services, reported that

while most local authorities co-operated with the emergency organisation there were a number of notable cases of local authority "Dereliction of duty," and Coventry was included on this list.⁽⁷⁴⁾ The Commissioner complained that the police force in the city had not been increased, and that the Council had declared that it was impossible to run a bus service. Most of the other local authorities that he judged to have failed in their duty were Labour controlled.

The inactivity of the City Council contrasts strongly with the lock-out of 1922 when pickets were harassed and police brought into the city. In 1926 and 1922 the Employers' Association tried to put pressure on the local authority, but met with much less success in 1926 than 1922. Thus on 10th May Varley wrote to Alderman Snape, the Mayor;

"As you are aware, we met you six days ago and urged very strongly the desirability of some effort being made by the local authority to maintain even a reduced Transport Service, with the main object of demonstrating a determination on the part of the Corporation to carry on, and in order to set an example of moral courage to the city generally and especially those men desirous of working.

It is with the keenest regret and disappointment that we have observed that the Corporation did not see its way to do this, either by its own transport service or by the encouragement of the services of private enterprise."

He went on to quote Baldwin, and to ask again for a transport service. He also spoke of the walk-outs from the factories, and the need for a police force to get men back:

"The Coventry Engineering Employers have accordingly endeavoured to keep their works open, but when on Thursday last the Engineers were withdrawn by the order of the Union, the position became very much more difficult.

As is well known the number of non-Union in the Coventry Engineering shops is overwhelming in proportion to the number of Union men, and it is our firm conviction that because of the lack of determination on the part of the Corporation that the non-Union men have joined in the strike due to intimidation by the strikers, affecting not only the person of the workman but his wife and family."

The establishment of a transport service would encourage men to return.

Moreover,

"We fully realise that any move in this direction must necessarily be preceded by a strong and well-organised force of Special Constabulary, and we consider that this force when enrolled and organised should be paraded openly in large numbers throughout the City in order to demonstrate that those willing to work are assured of adequate protection." (75)

On behalf of the Emergency Committee of the City Council, Snape replied on the same day. He agreed that public services should be maintained, and that "asserting the position that the Authorities and not the strikers are in control of the situation" was important. However, he went on to say that he had access to facts that the employers could not have. After further consideration on the transport position, he stated,

"It has been decided, with full deliberation, not to attempt for the present the commencement of a service. This decision is not in any sense based on weakness, but has been taken in what are considered to be the best interests of the City as a whole, after a consideration of all the relevant facts."

On police protection, Snape admitted that the police could not cover the 130 separate factories within the city boundaries.

"If the regular and emergency force can be supplemented by an adequate enrolment of special constables, more can, of course, be done, but I regret to say that the response to my appeal for specials has up to the present been disappointing. This is a matter where, it seems to me, your association ought to be able to help, and I urge strongly upon all your members the importance of bringing the matter to the immediate notice of their employees."

He reported that only five complaints of victimisation had been received by the police, and in none of these cases was there evidence to justify prosecution. He felt that this showed that there was not widespread victimisation. Finally, he felt that the public parading of special constables would be "An ill-conceived and provocative act." (76)

A day later Varley replied, pointing out that the Employers' Association represented "Over twenty million pounds sterling of capital." He claimed that intimidation was going on, and that his members were in a better position to see it than the police. He also seized on the suggestion that more special constables were needed:

"I am instructed, on behalf of all the firms of this Association, to offer to the Chief Constable approximately 200 men who are willing to enrol immediately as Special Constables for full time service, and whilst they are so enrolled they will continue to receive their full salaries or wages from the firms in whose respective employ they are."

The men were members of works staff, and would be required back when it was possible to reopen the works. As this letter came only a day after Snape had mentioned need for more specials, it is likely that the Association was volunteering men without having canvassed for volunteers. This was similar to an offer made in 1922. Finally Varley ended in a critical vein:

"My Executive Committee desire me to say that from the letter under reply there would appear to be circumstances applicable to Coventry that evidently do not apply to such cities as London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Birmingham, Nottingham, Plymouth, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield, Portsmouth, etc.etc. My Committee are at a loss to envisage such circumstances. Such Cities, by their action, have demonstrated their determination to govern and have not considered the running of essential services, such as omnibuses and trams, as provocative in the circumstances." (77)

There is no indication that the "volunteers" put forward by Varley were accepted by the Chief Constable. The significance of this exchange is that it reveals the extent of the stoppage, and the unwillingness of the City Council to pursue the vigorous line called by the employers. Unlike the situation in 1922, the Council was in the role of mediator between the employers and the workers, seeking to avoid confrontation with either body, and prepared to avoid making hasty decisions. This is qualified by the

action of the transport and electricity management behaviour after the strike, and must also be qualified by the incomplete nature of the dispute; had it lasted longer the authorities might have been forced to take control. The fact remains however, that for the nine days, the City fathers were prepared to let a large degree of authority concerning the transport of people and goods leave their hands and go to the strike organisation.

Part of the reason for this may have simply been due to the normal state of organisation of the local authority. Coventry did not spend money unless strictly necessary, and did not have the police or other forces needed to take firm possession of the streets and run a bus service against the wishes of the strikers. Coalition leaders were not used to taking decisive action and preferred to wait upon events. Another reason for inactivity was the tremendous support given to the strike by workers. Had some of the bus workers not obeyed the call the positions might have been different. The response clearly impressed the City Council. It is possible that there might have been some support for the miners on the Council, but this seems unlikely. The coalition instead appears to have decided that this was a national issue, and that no local steps could be taken to solve the crisis, hence there was no point in provoking the strikers. In this policy they showed themselves to be distinctly out of step with the employers; perhaps this was the only occasion in this period when such a state of affairs existed.

The third special factor in the strike in Coventry has already been referred to; the tremendous response from workers. Throughout the country the response was heartening to the organisers, and in many places it was more complete than Coventry. Postgate, Wilkinson, and Horrabin put Coventry in Class II of their evaluations, (Towns where the strike was

wholly effective but with weaknesses in some sections) while Birmingham was in Class I (Towns where the response was near to 100 per cent).⁽⁷⁸⁾ But in Coventry trade unionism was probably weaker in 1926 than in Birmingham, and a great many engineering workers in Coventry came out while many in Birmingham waited until called out the day before the strike ended. The fact was that not only did the great majority of engineering union members come out without prior authorisation from the national executives, but that they were joined by many thousands of non-trade union members. Given the weakness of the unions, and the fact that trade unionism was restricted to small groups of mostly skilled men, this response needs some explanation. What also needs to be explained is the fact that virtually none of the non-unionists who came out joined the unions, at least if the membership figures of the AEU can be used as a reliable guide. Orrell spoke at a mass meeting during the strike and congratulated the non-unionists, reminding them that the EC of the union had decided on an amnesty on the fines imposed after the lock-out, and he hoped this would lead to a return to the unions. On the day the strike was called off there were over five hundred non-unionists signing the union vacancy book, but the district records show that union membership only rose by 51 in the next month, and that by August, membership figures were back below the May figure, and a slow decline continued for the next few years.⁽⁷⁹⁾ Even most of the people who automatically turned to the union when out of work did not rejoin the union when back in work.

This suggests that the appeal of the general strike was very different to the non-union members than the normal language of trades unionism - craft militancy and left-wing rhetoric. The strike was an opportunity to show solidarity with the miners, a movement which appeared to bond together

working people across the country regardless of craft or union. It was not seen as an aggressive action, as a first step in the conquest of power. The workers' actions were limited to a defensive protection of part of the working class. This defensive action, at least for many workers, had little to do with the trade unions, though they were of course prepared to accept union leadership in the strike. It showed trade union consciousness in a general sense, but not necessarily in a specific sense. Coventry workers must have been influenced by their war-time trade union experiences and reacted spontaneously in support of the miners. But this show of solidarity did not change the realities of their own workplace experiences, and the irrelevance of unions to many of these experiences. The general strike therefore showed a curious glimpse of the emotional identification with an oppressed part of the working class by workers who refused to join their own unions. It showed a strength and feeling that the Coventry trade unions, in their normal day-to-day existence were not able to reach and contrasted the potential support that existed for unions with the miserable reality. It would be wrong to say that this gulf between potential and reality was caused by a purely voluntary rejection of the unions; clearly the employers discouraged union activity. But it is equally wrong to see the workers who so readily walked-out without waiting to be called, as being completely intimidated by their employers.

The response from the non-unionists boosted the morale of the union leaders of the strike, who knew that elsewhere in their area the strike was all but solid. Accordingly, the end of the strike with no concessions to the miners was a bitter blow, so bitter that the Coventry Council of Action sent Hodgkinson and Buxton down to London to ask the General Council

of the TUC to resume the dispute! The delegates met a group of General Council members, led by Alf Purcell, who, as we saw, had been for a short time the first Labour M.P. for the city. To Hodgkinson, who had not always agreed with Purcell's left-wing rhetoric, this was an emotional revelation of Purcell's feet of clay, but Buxton gives a more matter of fact account of the meeting which makes it clear that not surprisingly, the General Council members were not swayed by the Coventry delegates.⁽⁸⁰⁾ Still Coventry refused to give in. The two returned on the Friday evening 14th May, before there had been a full return to work, and reported to the Council of Action. On the Saturday, the Council called a conference of all the members of the District Committees, and a resolution was passed calling on the Executives of the various unions to again call their members out. By this time it was much too late, and when the AEU District Committee met the resolution was only noted.⁽⁸¹⁾ The AEU District Committee also noted the total cost of the strike to the union in the city; £26 2s 2d, which included a penny levy of the members which was the financial basis of the Council of Action.⁽⁸²⁾

It was not until Monday 17th May that there was a general return to work in the city. It would appear that the delayed start was due mainly to the attitude of the employers. On Thursday 13th May many AEU members tried to go back but a considerable number of factories refused to open until the next week. In other cases a small number of men only were taken back. The Rover toolroom took back only 3 out of about 70 employees. Some firms were prepared to start most workers if they would accept that others could be sacked; thus Daimler and Humber discharged a good many workers. The only report of a full return was at Herberts, where the "men returned as if nothing had happened" on the Thursday.⁽⁸³⁾ There was no immediate return on the Railways, Buses and Trams. The local transport manager sent

a circular to all employees deploring "the recent precipitate and illegal action," and telling the men that they had terminated their contracts and had to apply individually for re-engagement. This meant that they would lose their holiday entitlement.⁽⁸⁴⁾ A mass meeting of those employed refused to accept anything other than a resumption without any strings, and after a meeting between union representatives, the Mayor and Council officials, the circular was withdrawn and a return took place on Saturday 15th May.⁽⁸⁵⁾ By Monday all the factories were open, and although the union claimed there was some victimisation, particularly at Dunlops, there was no strong union opposition. The newly-found militancy of the strikers disappeared with the end of the dispute. For a few months, the strike had an effect on production in Coventry. Before the strike in April 1926 there had been 1,300 out of work but this rose to 5,436 by mid-July, before gradually declining.⁽⁸⁶⁾ This enabled employers to hit back at trade union militants, and also took the steam out of the engineering unions' pay claim.

The strike had put the Trades Council back into the centre of action in the labour movement. It was the only body capable of uniting the movement and providing the sort of organisation and leadership that was needed. But without exceptional events it was like the spirit of the non-union workers - great in potential but small in practice. It showed the labour and political movement united under the leadership of the Trades Council. Right-wing and left-wing labour, and the Communist Party, worked together. But there was no sign of Labour capitalising on the militancy shown in the strike, and while the Communist Party and Minority Movement probably picked up members, not enough joined to lead to a substantial change in the fortunes of either body. Thus though in one way the strike was a 'moment

of truth" in that a comparatively united working class showed its power and potential, it was also an aberration, in that political and trade union life soon returned to pre-strike patterns.

III The Unions in Isolation

Trade union membership continued to decline in the city for the rest of the decade and the early years of the 1930s. Figures available for two of the major unions in the city, the AEU and the NUVB, show that the decline followed a different pattern in each case. NUVB membership held up reasonably well in the late 1920s, indeed its membership was slightly higher in the years after the general strike than in the years before the strike. But in 1931 membership began to fall, and by the end of 1933 it was about a thousand strong, less than half of the January 1931 figure. Moreover, although membership later picked up in the late 1930s, it never reached the figures of the early 1920s. This suggests that the union was particularly affected by the shift to mass production in vehicles, and unable to pick up members in the new munitions factories of the late 1930s.⁽⁸⁷⁾ The AEU continued to decline immediately after the general strike, and membership figures remained depressed until beginning to recover at the end of 1934. The lowest point reached was at the end of 1933 when membership was down to 2,415, only a few hundred more than NUVB membership and about 600 less than at the time of the general strike.⁽⁸⁸⁾ Moreover, effective membership was about three-quarters of this figure. In October 1928, when membership was 2,771, Givens reported that only 2,100 of these (76%) were paying members.⁽⁸⁹⁾ However, when there was a recovery, unlike the NUVB the AEU was able to increase its membership above its mid 1920s figures.

The general decline in union membership meant a reduction in activity at the workplace, the isolation of the leadership from the rank and file, and a changing relationship with employers. The virtual disappearance of shop stewards meant that District Committees were denied the information needed to present cases to the employers. Thus when there was a series of reductions in piece-work prices at Armstrong-Siddeley, the AEU DC was unable to organise opposition because it could not find out what was going on in the factory, despite the fact that eight branch secretaries worked there. DC minutes recorded;

"There was a delay of 18 days with D.C. still in the dark as to what had actually happened. As this firm was now the biggest and most prosperous in the town, members could rest assured that such actions, unless checked, would be rapidly copied by others...

...We were more entitled to co-operation than the Employers, from our own members and Officials, and unless we were going to be acknowledged as the responsible body we should have to consider some action to overcome the present state of affairs." (90)

In this case, as in a number of others, discussions about the reductions took place in the factory between the management and the men, and even the union members there did not organise a union intervention.

Another incident involved reductions at Rover in 1929, and again information was hard to come by:

"Secretary pointed out that the Coventry D.C. were in a very silly position when they were informed by Birmingham of events in Coventry which should be known to us, and that our position would be more untenable still if we took a case to the Employers without any information from our own members, whose duty it was to give us the facts of the case."

In this instance, the DC was eventually able to get some information from a Brother James, who made it clear that the company did not encourage its supply:

"Bro. James again emphasised their position as a minority and asked the Committee not to jeopardise their jobs by giving away the information they had been able to supply to us.

Chairman assured the witness that D.C. were always most careful in this respect and would not take any action which would necessitate bringing any individual into the limelight apart from our Officials." (91)

This shows the return of trade unionism to semi-clandestine activity.

Various propaganda campaigns were held by the AEU and other unions, to win men back to the union, but they made little or no progress for many years. In some instances they seemed to have set back the already low morale of the remaining union activists. An AEU National Officer, Lamb, came to Coventry and spoke at a number of meetings, but without success. So badly did the campaign go in his first week in the city that he roundly denounced the DC:

"Bro. Lamb then stated his great disappointment at the utter lack of support given by D.C. and branch officers, and stated that he had no intention of allowing his two weeks stay in Coventry being rendered useless. D.C. were responsible for arrangements, but to decide upon a meeting at such a place and time, without giving support at such meetings was not his conception of Propaganda work. Up to the present, three members with no non-unionists had been the maximum attendance. No Organiser could give his message to empty seats with any benefit to the Society, and the members in the district were required to provide at least a nucleus at all meetings." (92)

Lamb returned in 1929 and 1930, and again complained at the lack of support from branch officers. The DC at one time considered amalgamating a number of branches, as they were not active.

Given the decline of workplace activity, the importance of works and local conferences as an opportunity to negotiate with the employers increase for the unions, particularly the AEU. But the CDEEA realised this, and sought to downgrade such meetings. In the first place they made sure that the procedure was adhered to and that conferences could not be held if

workers had not raised the issue with their own superiors. J. Francis, the NUVB regional official noted a new attitude;

"Where previously there was a willingness to receive Trade Union Officials at the onset of any question, there is now a definite insistence that the procedure shall be carried out by the workers before the question can be discussed in the office." (93)

When conferences did occur it seems to have been the policy of the CDEEA to try to personalise the argument, so that it was seen as a dispute between Givens and the Association, rather than a negotiation between two representative bodies. Thus at the end of 1928 Givens reported on a local conference on excessive overtime;

"The Chairman as usual attempted to make it a personal matter to Mr. Givens and not the Society's Agreements with the Employers." (94)

(It is interesting to note that the union was still sometimes referred to as the Society, as old habits died hard).

Givens was selected as the target by the employers because, although himself a target for attack from the left, he usually adopted a tough attitude to the employers. In this he differed from the ODDs for the district. Orrell had such friendly relations with CDEEA that when he was retired from his post with the union, he informed the employers, and the Executive of their body offered to find him a "suitable post." Within a few weeks he was found a public house, and he asked the CDEEA Executive to recommend him to brewers.⁽⁹⁵⁾ His successor, Dempster, covered Birmingham as well as the Coventry district, so was not so available, but at his first local conference Givens complained to the DC about him;

"The Secretary stated his opinion that ODD helped the Employers as against Bro. Stokes, and appeared to immediately accept any and every claim by the Employers when they mentioned Managerial Functions." (96)

This sort of charge could not be made against Givens; indeed a number of his meetings with the employers ended with disorder. The Association's Secretary, Varley, was not one to mince his words, and on one occasion at least threw Givens out of a meeting;

"Mr. Varley objected to Sec. interrupting his statements and during a heated passage told Secy. that if he could not observe the decencies of ordinary business intercourse he had better leave his office as he was stating their case and would not have interruptions." (97)

The problem with these sort of encounters was that the union got nowhere. Even when there were not violent disagreements the Employers' Association could usually make a close assessment of the support behind the union officials. Thus when the AEU pursued a claim for an increase for skilled workers in 1929 up to Central Conference Varley reported to the local employers.

"The application in question was not a genuine application backed by the Toolroom workers and Millwrights working in the local engineering shops, but was more in the nature of a 'stunt' effort on the part of the local officials of the Union." (98)

On another occasion, an application for time workers had been pursued to Central Conference, and no agreement was reached. Although there was no further procedure, "in view of the state of organisation, D.C. were unable to recommend any course of action," and the matter was dropped. (99)

By the early 1930s, the CDEEA had succeeded in stifling not only trade union activity at the workplace, but also activity at district level. Only a small number of works and local conferences took place, as Varley sought to discourage them and rule them out of order wherever possible. This forced the AEU to accept discussions with the employers that were outside procedure. In April 1933 Varley had his first unofficial meeting with Givens, and reported,

"This was the first occasion that Mr. Givens had made it his business to come in an informal way to discuss matters on a friendly basis and it was generally agreed that the change of attitude taken by the Union in question was very gratifying." (100)

Informal discussions confirmed the subordinate role of the union; the two sides were no longer in formal equality. Improvements achieved by the union were concessions rather than negotiated agreements.

The CDEEA had earlier set out its views on the framework within which unions should be allowed to operate, in its contribution to the discussion amongst employers that preceded the passing of the Trades Dispute Act of 1927. In a detailed letter of September 1926 Varley informed the EEF that the Employers' Association supported the restrictions on union activity that the national body had proposed, but sought to go further by asking for the repeal of the 1906 Trade Disputes Act and for picketing of all and every description to be made illegal. The other proposals that they supported sought to make unions liable for damages for their actions, that strikes in essential services should be prohibited, and that in other industries they would be legal if the majority of union and non-union members in the workplace supported it in a secret ballot. (101)

With the employers so clearly on the offensive, and the unions in the engineering industry in the city reduced to virtual impotence, there was further dissension and disruption in the AEU, due to the activities of the Minority Movement and the Communist Party.

The Minority Movement

Although the Minority Movement was set up nationally in 1924 by the Communist Party to take over work in the trade unions that had previously

been carried out by RILU the movement was slow to develop in Coventry. The group became active in 1925. At the first meeting of the Coventry District Committee of the MM after the 1925 conference, the Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Secretary that were appointed were all members of the Communist Party, and although a number of prominent members of the Labour Party supported the movement, it was always influenced primarily by the Communist Party.⁽¹⁰²⁾ Its two most dedicated leaders were W.H.Stokes and Bill Buxton, while George Kingston, the Communist President of the Trades Council, was Chairman of the MM for a time. The organisation was able to attract a number of local Labour Party supporters, including Cresswell, who chaired the MM for a time, Halliwell, and J.H.Ward who was Chairman from 1927 to 1929 and Vice Chairman before then. A.E. Mabbs and Alice Arnold spoke at its meetings, and Alice Arnold claimed that she was a supporter who would have joined had she not been a full time union official.⁽¹⁰³⁾ There may have been other Labour supporters who were not active.

The MM had a functioning District Committee for several years, and aimed to have flourishing groups in the different industries and the Co-op. In practise it was difficult to sustain active groups. The MM was probably more successful with its Co-op group than with any other. Halliwell and Kingston were elected to the Management Committee of the Co-op, and one of two Co-op groups affiliated to the MM, including the Lockhurst Lane Co-op Womens' Guild. An attempt to get the Stoke Heath Womens' Co-op Guild affiliated had led to threats by the national Co-op body to close it down.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ A list of members of the MM Co-op group in 1929 shows 20 names, but by then this consisted of most of the active MM members.

Consistent support for the MM came from the District Committee of the Workers' Union. In 1926 Bill Buxton, Jim Smith and A.Shaw were all active

in the MM and on the District Committee of the WU. This body sent delegates to the National Conferences for a number of years, while several branches of the union affiliated to the MM. In general the number of union bodies affiliated was very small. A sign of the decline of the MM was in July 1929 when the WU DC decided by 5 votes to 4 not to send a delegate to the National Conference.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ In previous years, there had been only limited success in getting unions to send delegates; besides the WU DC the Trades Council also sent a delegate, as did a couple of WU branches, and perhaps one AEU branch. There were four MM supporters on the District Committee of the AEU - Stokes, Bates, Harbourne and Latham. However, Latham could not be relied on by any group. He often seemed motivated mainly by personal dislike of Givens, and on issues that were not to do with criticising the district secretary, he would regularly vote against the MM members. He may have dropped out of the MM at some point. The other area where the MM had influence was the Trades Council. Kingston was Chairman both of the Trades Council and the MM, while Buxton, Halliwell and Wellings, amongst others, were all leading lights.

In all the union and co-op areas where the MM had influence, it depended on small groups of militants acting together in an informal way. It proved impossible for the movement to set up and run for any period of time functioning sections in different industries or unions, even though there were a number of members in such industries or unions. The main reason was that members had not been convinced of the need for a formal organisation. With only a handful of supporters in each union, the MM acted as a federation of loose groupings of the left rather than as a distinctive organisation challenging the existing leadership. It was

also very small, never having more than a couple of dozen paid up supporters. When a voluntary levy of 1d a month was agreed on to raise local funds, only 16 members took part in it.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ In June 1928 W.R. Read, the Midlands Organiser, attended a group meeting and criticised the group; too much was left to Stokes, as secretary, and the sectional groups were not functioning properly. Nor were there any union branch or workplace groups, though a women's group had been set up.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾

The Coventry MM was therefore a forum for discussion and a vehicle for a number of successful meetings and local conferences. It brought together a number of trade union militants from the Communist Party and the Labour Party, but only built a very rudimentary form of organisation. The disciplined machine poised to take over from the corrupt leadership, which was how the national office of the MM increasingly saw itself, was a vision that made little sense in a city with a weak militant movement and a disorganised and demoralised trade union movement. It was another pressure group on the left, and one of its most important tasks was to send a delegate to an Allocation Committee that had been set up to ensure that all groups on the left had equal access to the few public halls in the city, to ensure that their public meetings did not clash with one another's. The MM was added to the list that already included the Labour Party, ILP, CP, Trades Council, Co-op, Free Speech Defence Committee, and the various other ad hoc and campaigning bodies that existed. This emphasis on public meetings that all of the bodies displayed served to hide the lack of real organisation in this period.

The MM appears to have been most active in 1926/27, and was already in decline in 1928. The first blow had fallen in April 1927 when orders from the MM Head Office had led to the acceptance of the Coventry Trades

Council disaffiliating from the MM. Without such orders, it may well have refused to disaffiliate, in which case it would have lost TUC recognition, but in practice disaffiliation made no difference. It showed, however, that the official union movement was wherever possible clamping down on the activity of the MM. In Coventry official disapproval had little effect on the Labour Party activists in the MM, though active membership seems to have been reduced by early 1928. A more potent threat to the Movement came from its sponsors, the Communist Party.

In June 1928 Reed, the Midland Organiser, when criticising Coventry MM for its lack of activity, denounced "pseudo-lefts," that is, left-
(108)
wingers who were not members of the Communist Party. At the next monthly meeting, for the first time there was a split as to who should be the group's delegate to the National MM Conference, and the President, J.H.Ward, a Labour Party member, was elected by one vote against Reynolds, Communist Party member.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ On the Trades Council the MM group found itself in disagreement with the majority on a number of issues, and pushed its disagreement to the extent that it became to be regarded as a troublesome unit. One of the disagreements was the decision of the Trades Council not to hold a rally on May 1st but to celebrate May Day with a public meeting in the Drill Hall called "Labour and the Nation." This was clearly seen as an affront to the MM and CP who wanted a rally on May Day itself and felt that if the Trades Council could not be affiliated to the MM it should not be allowed to act as a mouthpiece for the Labour Party.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ Events in Coventry at this time were influenced by the changing policy of the Communist Party and its attempts to differentiate clearly between itself and left-wingers in the Labour Party. A change in policy on the part of the Communist International eventually led to a new

line. This saw the established labour leadership and trade union leadership as class traitors, and attacked as even more dangerous anyone who would not split with this leadership. Groups like the Minority Movement and the Left-Wing Movement were put in a difficult position.

There is no record of a Left-Wing group in the Labour Party in Coventry, and it is clear that the Coventry Labour Party as a whole did not support the National Left-Wing Movement, which was a Communist attempt to build on left sympathy and establish influence inside the Labour Party. However, it is likely, indeed Ward pointed to it, that there was a left-wing group in the local Labour Party, probably consisting of the Labour MM members. Much of the activity of this movement nationally centred around the paper Sunday Worker and a Sunday Worker Committee was in existence, working closely with the MM which made frequent though not very successful attempts to sell its paper, The Worker. With the CP change of line, the MM was to carry on, but with more emphasis on attacking the left outside the CP, while the left-wing movement and its newspaper were wound up.

All of this internal struggle within the CP and its cavalier decisions respecting what in theory were independent movements contributed to the collapse of the MM. In February 1929 Bert Cresswell resigned as Chairman of the group, only a month after he had been elected, and two months later, Ward, an ex-Chairman, also resigned. It is worth quoting from Ward's letter of resignation, for he gave a number of reasons for leaving, and they probably covered the views of the rest of the Labour Party membership who were drifting out. He began by referring to the Left-Wing movement, and it is clear that he saw this as being very close to the MM:

"I have also come to the conclusion now that the National Left Wing Movement has been dropped in favour of the C.P. that the M.M. will be ruled too strictly also by the C.P. I find it a very difficult obstacle to do any useful work inside the Labour Party if my actions are to be governed by CP's."

He also criticised the behaviour of the MM group at Trades Council meetings. He had "left several meetings of the Council very disgusted at the behaviour and criticisms of the MM group." Finally, he felt that the movement was changing, "taking on an atmosphere that was not acceptable to me," no doubt a feeling shared by the others who left at this time, that they were the "Pseudo-lefts" now under attack.⁽¹¹¹⁾ In the next few months the WU DC decided not to send delegates to National Conference of the MM, and the Chairman's ruling prevented the Trades Council from being represented. Attendance at MM meetings fell, and they began to be held less frequently. The Chairmanship went to A.E. Tyrrell, a Communist who had been active in the Unemployed Workers Committee in the early 1920s and who had recently formed a Coventry branch of the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement.⁽¹¹²⁾ The organisation may have carried on for some years, though there are no records of its meetings after July 1930. Stokes was on the National Committee of the Metal Workers section, which apparently lasted beyond this.

Although it had not amounted to a major force, the MM and the readership of the Sunday Worker had constituted some form of a bridge between the CP and the Labour Party, and had clearly been acceptable to at least some people in positions of influence in the Labour Party. The breaking of this link, whatever the provocation, and there appears to have been little at local level, pushed the CP more firmly into the political wilderness, though it was clear that it was heading in that direction anyway.

It also weakened the left-wing influence on the Labour Party at a crucial time in its development in Coventry, when it was re-establishing itself on the City Council and laying the basis for its municipal politics. The link with the CP had also been a small link with militant trade unionism, and this was another element that had been in the Labour leadership experience that disappeared in the 1930s.

In some parts of the country, notably mining areas, the traumas of the General Strike, the miners' lock-out, and persistent unemployment pushed many into opposition to capitalism and the policies of the Labour Party leadership. In Coventry this did not happen. The strike caught the sympathy and support of many workers, union and non-union, and gave a boost to the left in the year after. But for the rest, the labour movement in Coventry remained quiescent, the unions disorganised, and the left isolated and irrelevant. Without the stimulus of hunger or craft pride, the mass of workers were not prepared to accept the leadership of the unions or the Labour Party, while the left could offer them no alternative. The Labour Party could come to terms with the situation by basing its activities on electoral support, but the left was condemned to frustration and factional behaviour.

After the decline of the minority movement, the CP continued to remain in isolation, and lost further ground in the trade union movement. The years 1929/31 saw a series of clashes between the left and right on the AEU DC, and no doubt on the WU DC as well. Neither side emerged with much credit. In June 1929 the Workers' Weekly carried a report on the strike at Armstrong-Whitworth, the only serious stoppage in engineering in the city for several years, criticising union officials. Givens brought the offending copy to a DC meeting, and denounced it as "Part of a deliberate

policy to vilify the Trade Union Officials generally." The minutes report that Stokes agreed that the statements in the paper were wrong and that he would take it up with the editors.⁽¹¹³⁾ At the next meeting there was a long disagreement caused by Stokes objecting to the minutes, and moving their reference back. They were eventually agreed by the casting vote of the Chairman, but after further challenge at the next meeting, the offending paragraph in the minutes was dropped. (Though not taken out of the minutes!)⁽¹¹⁴⁾ Later in the year there was a dispute caused by a ban on overtime at Humber. It was clear that a significant number of workers there did not support it, and objected to being in the front line of a general campaign for a district increase. Some workers continued to work overtime, including Latham, who was a member of the DC. He denied that the DC had the authority to sanction an overtime ban, and Stokes successfully moved a motion of censure on him. Latham took this to the EC which upheld his appeal, and denied the right of the DC to ban overtime on a general wage increase demand.⁽¹¹⁵⁾ This was followed by Stokes and Bates moving a motion claiming the action of the EC was "Against the principles of trade unionism." This was defeated by the Chairman's casting vote.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ Later in the year, Tootill, the District President, decided to resign from office due to the continued troubles in the union.⁽¹¹⁷⁾

This continued dissension seems to have been blamed more on the left than on the right in the union. Stokes usually stood for office at district level every year without much success; in 1931 he managed for the first time to come top of the poll for District President on the first ballot, but there was clearly a strong feeling against him, for he was decisively beaten in the second ballot.⁽¹¹⁸⁾

Stokes and others on the left were particularly dismayed by what they saw as weakness on the part of the EC of the union over wage negotiations in 1931. Once again a motion of condemnation was proposed by Stokes and defeated at the DC by a casting vote.⁽¹¹⁹⁾ This time, however, union officials were determined to deal with critics, and when Stokes signed a circular attacking the EC he was promptly suspended from all office in the union. The Coventry DC was reluctant to come to his support. After temporising over the matter for a month, while replacing Stokes with Sidney Stringer, it eventually passed a motion regretting his action, and took no further steps to support his appeal. However, a poorly attended aggregate meeting passed a resolution protesting at his treatment.⁽¹²⁰⁾

DC lack of support for Stokes faded as time went by, and he was backed by a number of local union figures in his campaign to get back into office in 1932 and 1933. He was ruled to be ineligible to contest the District Presidency elections in 1933, and was defeated in an election as a DC member. However, in 1934 he was allowed to stand, and won the post of District President.⁽¹²¹⁾ The poll was low, and the result was more a reflection of Stokes' personality and perseverance than a marked swing to the left. With Stokes off the DC for over two years, dissension died down but did not vanish. There was a row over the ballot on whether to consider employing a full time official, and Latham's criticisms of Givens eventually led to him being suspended from the DC at the end of 1933.⁽¹²²⁾

Despite his eventual comeback, the behaviour of Stokes in the late 1920s and early 1930s was that of an intransigent opponent of the EC of the union and the District officials and officers. He became more isolated and under attack as time went by, and the overall effect of this

situation was to weaken the DC at a time when it was already extremely weak. Similar dissensions occurred on the Trades Council. The Annual Report for 1928 shows a considerable Communist influence; Kingston was President, and of the three public meetings held by the Council, two were addressed by Communists (Leckie and Buxton). Buxton and Chalmers also reported on a visit to Russia.⁽¹²³⁾

The 1930 Report shows a different picture. Kingston had been replaced, and the Report commented

"The policy of disruption pursued by a small group of delegates was intensified during the year, and scenes occurred which raised the indignation of the overwhelming number of delegates. As a consequence, four delegates were expelled. It is with real regret that the Council has to record these happenings. The refusal to accept the most elementary principles of democracy is a serious reflection on those concerned. The failure to appreciate the necessity for united action, based on decisions taken after full and free discussion, is not calculated to help the worker but to destroy him." (124)

Whatever the provocations, the Communist group had clearly made it easy for its opponents to deal with it, and there is no evidence to suggest that this "exposure" of social democracy led to any gains on the part of the Communists.

While dealing with part of the left on the Council, its officers continued their scarcely veiled criticisms of the Labour Party in their report. In 1928 the report had stated

"Whilst the Council emphatically believes that the right use of political power is essential to Working-class emancipation, it is regretted that there is a tendency to persuade the workers that it is only necessary to put an X in the right place on the ballot form and everything will be all right. It is not sufficiently understood that it is only through the actual control of economic power that emancipation can be achieved; and that the whole energy of the Trade Union Movement should be bent towards securing this control from the exploiting class, using the political machine as one of the instruments to that end." (125)

In 1930 the Annual Report continued this theme:

"Those who expected a Labour Government to bring into being a new heaven and a new earth have been disappointed. In past reports we have, however, warned delegates against taking this point of view. It cannot be too clearly understood that economic power is the real power which exercises control - political power must take a second place...A Labour Government in office - not power - has been a bulwark against the full consequences of present-day capitalism failing to deliver the goods." (126)

This theme was no doubt partly pushed to establish the important role of the Trades Council, but also as a form of criticism of Labour electoralism at both local and national level. In the 1930 report it existed alongside several attacks on Communists. Besides reporting the expulsion of four delegates, it criticised the Colony Cottages Tenants Defence Committee for allowing themselves "to be used for political ends with the result that their cause was severely prejudiced." There were also unfavourable comments on one of the hunger marches; the marchers were "ill-advised" and the very poor response to an appeal for help which came from union branches with "many expressing their emphatic disapproval" shows that Communists were isolated in most of these branches. (127)

Inevitably, by proclaiming themselves to be in opposition, Communists on the Trades Council contributed to a drift to the right on that body, and a lessening of criticisms of the Labour Party. Communists had criticised the Council for being too close to the Labour Party, and concentrated on trying to wean it away. In this they were unsuccessful, and also made it very difficult to use the other tactic of using Trades Council influence as a counter-weight to the electoralism of the Labour Party. The 1933 Annual Report again stresses the important role of the Trades Councils and Unions in the labour movement, but it cannot be said to contain either openly or by implication, criticisms of Labour for neglecting union and industrial affairs. (128) Thus at the time when electoral success was

beginning to emerge as a real possibility for the Coventry Labour Party, union bodies and the Trades Council were not in a position to preserve a labour movement balanced between industrial organisation and electoral politics. Clearly the main reason was the reduced strength of the unions, but a contributory factor was the policy of the Communist Party to engage in systematic struggle with Labour and Labour supporters in the unions.

FOOTNOTES

The Unions in Defeat

1. AEU DC Minutes, 15th August 1922.
2. ibid.
3. AEU DC Minutes, 29th January 1924.
4. " " " 22nd February 1923.
5. " District Committee Minutes, 21st August 1923.
6. " " " Monthly membership returns.
7. " " " Verbatim reports of a number of interviews 1925, carried out by the District Committee.
8. AEU District Committee Minutes, 3rd October 1922.
9. R. Hyman, The Workers' Union, Oxford University Press, 1971, p.145.
10. Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, Annual Reports, 1921-1938 (1922 missing).
11. NUVB, Monthly Report April 1923. Was quarterly from 1927.
12. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 8th September 1930.
13. AEU District Committee Minutes, 13th November 1923. Evidence about Humber.
14. AEU District Committee Minutes Reports from nine workshops, 1925.
15. ibid.
16. M.L. Yates, Wages and Labour Conditions in British Engineering, 1937, pp. 113-115.
17. AEU District Committee Minutes, Reports from nine workshops, 1925.
18. ibid.
19. AEU Monthly Journal and Report, January 1923.
20. " " " " " February 1924.
21. " " " " " January 1925.
22. " " " " " January 1926.
23. " " " " " August 1923, also AEU District Committee Minutes, 26th July 1923.

24. AEU Monthly Journal and Report, August 1924.
25. AEU District Committee Minutes, 30th June 1924.
26. AEU Monthly Journal and Report, March 1926.
27. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 22nd March 1926.
28. W.R. Morris, Policies That Have Built the Morris Business, Journal of Industrial Economics, August 1954, p.197.
29. Proceedings of the Institute of Automobile Engineers, Vol. XXII 1927-28. Record of a discussion by the Coventry group on a paper about increased production.
30. Motor Vehicles Report, London, Political & Economic Planning, 1950.
31. G. Turner, The Car Makers, London 1964, pp.25-28.
32. W.R. Morris, op.cit. p.196.
33. F.G. Woollard, "Some Notes on British Methods of Continuous Production," in Proceedings of the Institution of Automobile Engineers, Vol. XIX, 1924/25, p.419.
34. ibid, p. 427.
35. ibid, during discussion of the Coventry group on the paper.
36. ibid.
37. ibid.
38. AEU District Committee Minutes, Annual Membership Returns.
39. " " " " 20th May 1924.
40. CDEEA Executive Committee, Minutes, 3rd March 1924.
41. AEU District Committee Minutes, 1st April 1924.
42. " " " " 2nd July 1924.
43. " " " " 19th August 1924.
44. " " " " 15th April 1926, E.Burns, General Strike, May 1926; Trades Councils in Action, Lawrence & Wishart, 1975, p.112, and unpublished essay by Bill Buxton, The Part Played by the Coventry Trades Council in the 1926 General Strike.
45. The Worker, 10th December 1926. This was the paper of the Minority Movement.
46. Trades Council Report to General Council of TUC, Wednesday 5th May 1926. A.E.Mabbs was President of the Trades Council.
47. AEU District Committee Minutes, 3rd May 1926.
48. " " " " 5th May 1926.

49. ibid.
50. ibid.
51. AEU District Committee Minutes, 6th May and 12th May 1926.
52. Letter, from either Mabbs or Baird, the secretary of the Trades Council, to the TUC General Council, 6 p.m. Thursday 6th May 1926.
53. Report to TUC General Council written by Kingsley Martin, W.A. Robon, and Mr. Wood, Monday 10th May 1926.
54. AEU District Committee Minutes, 6th May and 11th May 1926.
55. " " " " 11th May 1926.
56. Letter from Mabbs to TUC General Council, Wednesday 5th May 1926.
57. Circular No. 90, 8th May 1926, from District Industrial Council for Electricity Supply Industry, and signed by both sides of industry.
58. Report of an interview between Trade Union Representatives and The Emergency Sub-Committee of the Coventry Corporation Electricity Committee, evening of Saturday 8th May 1926.
59. Letter from A.E. Tidmas, ETU, and G. Morris, WU to the Town Clerk, Tuesday 11th May 1926.
60. Letter from Frederick Smith, Town Clerk to G. Morris, Tuesday 11th May 1926.
61. Letter from Tidmas and Morris to Town Clerk, Wednesday 12th May 1926.
62. K. Martin, W.A. Robon and Mr. Wood. Report to TUC, 10th May 1926.
63. Buxton, op.cit.
64. K. Martin and others, op. cit.
65. Buxton, op.cit.
66. Report from Coventry Trades Council, Midday, Friday 7th May 1926.
67. AEU District Committee Minutes, 12th May 1926.
68. Buxton, op.cit.
69. Burns, op.cit.
70. Coventry Co-operative Society, Management Board Minutes, 11th May 1926.
71. The Wheatsheaf, monthly journal of the CCS, July 1927.
72. " " March 1928.
73. Buxton, op.cit.

74. ^{PRO} T163 26 General Strike, Report By Chief Civil Commissioner.
75. Letter from John Varley, Secretary of CDEEA, 10th May 1926.
76. Letter from Frank Snape, Mayor, to Varley, 10th May 1926.
77. Letter from Varley to Snape, 11th May 1926.
78. Postgate, Wilkinson and Horrabin, A Workers' History of the Great Strike, 1927.
79. AEU District Committee, Monthly membership returns.
80. G. Hodgkinson, op. cit, p.99, and Buxton, op.cit.
81. AEU District Committee, Minutes, 18th May 1926.
82. " " " " 22nd June 1926.
83. " " " " 13th May 1926.
84. Letter from T.R. Whitehead, to all employees. Manager of the Tramways and Motor Omnibus Department, 13th May 1926.
85. Letters between F. Smith, Town Clerk, and C. Savage, TGWU, Branch Secretary, 14th May 1926.
86. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 7th June 1926, and 6th August 1926.
87. NUVB Quarterly Report and Journal, 1921-1939.
88. AEU District Committee Minutes, Monthly membership returns.
89. " " " " 18th October 1928.
90. " " " " 15th August 1927.
91. " " " " 22nd November 1929.
92. " " " " 22nd November 1928.
93. NUVB Quarterly Report and Journal, April 1931.
94. AEU District Committee Minutes, 18th December 1928.
95. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 5th January and 26th January 1931.
96. AEU District Committee Minutes, 18th December 1928.
97. " " " " 17th September 1929.
98. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 19th August 1929.
99. AEU District Committee Minutes, 17th January 1928.
100. CDEEA Executive Committee, Minutes, 3rd April 1933.

101. Letter from Varley to the Legal Secretary of the Engineering and Allied Employers' National Federation, giving the views of the Coventry Association to a document called "The Law Relating to Trade Unions," 24th September 1926.
102. Coventry District Committee of the Minority Movement (CMM) Minutes, 26th November 1925.
103. Cresswell had been a Communist in the early 1920s, and became a senior Labour Party figure, eventually becoming the first Lord Mayor of the city in the 1950s. Halliwell was one of the leaders of the Party in the 1930s, but left in 1941. Mabbs had been Chairman of the Party in the 1920s, and Arnold served on the City Council from 1919 onwards, being Mayor in 1937.
104. CMM Minutes, 27th January 1926. "The MM was one of the few political areas where women were active, and at one meeting where it was agreed to send a woman and a man to speak to a union branch it has resolved 'in future that a woman comrade attend any Branch Meetings where a man speaker is in attendance' CMM Minutes 18th August 1926."
105. CMM Minutes 24th July 1929.
106. " " 27th November 1927.
107. " " 27th June 1928.
108. ibid.
109. CMM Minutes, 11th July 1928.
110. " " 27th February 1929.
111. Letter from J.H. Ward to Stokes, 21st April, 1929.
112. CMM Minutes, 27th February 1929.
113. AEU District Committee Minutes, 18th June 1929.
114. " " " " 25th June, and 2nd July 1929.
115. " " " " 12th November, 18th November, 19th November, 3rd December, 19th December and 21st January 1929/30.
116. AEU District Committee Minutes, 25th February 1930.
117. " " " " 29th July 1930.
118. " " " " 6th January 1931.
119. " " " " 23rd June 1931.
120. " " " " 14th July, 21st July, 30th July and 18th August 1931.

121. AEU District Committee Minutes, 2nd January 1934.
122. " " " " 5th December 1933.
123. Coventry Trades Council, Annual Report, 1928.
124. " " " " " 1930.
125. " " " " " 1928.
126. " " " " " 1930.
127. ibid.
128. Coventry Trades Council, Annual Report, 1933.

CHAPTER SIX

Civic Leaders

I The Coalition .

The engineering industry, and motor vehicles in particular, dominated the economic life of Coventry, but exerted a less direct influence on the political life of the city. Here leadership came from a group of people for the most part unconnected with the big factories. Civic affairs and municipal politics had a separate existence from industrial life, though greatly influenced by it.

Until 1937 the City Council was controlled by a coalition of Liberals and Conservatives that had been in undisputed power of the city for many decades, and which had not significantly changed its social base from the era before to the arrival of the big industries. It is possible to identify the occupations of most of the Councillors and Aldermen who served under any of the Liberal, Conservative, Coalition or Progressive labels in between 1918 and 1938, and although some of the descriptions of these occupations are very vague, an interesting analysis can be made.⁽¹⁾

Of the 98 Councillors and Aldermen who were members of the coalition in this period, and whose occupations can be identified, some 31, or nearly one third, can be described as dealers or retailers, most of them being shopkeepers. When publicans, builders, and commercial agents are added, the number reaches 44, nearly half of the total. The second largest category was those engaged in manufacture, for the most part small scale, 18 in all. Most of these manufacturers were associated with the old established trades in the city, such as W.H. Grant and his family silk works, and Fred Lee with his watch and electrical jewellery company. In

some trades, such as watches, boots, and clothing, the distinction between manufacturing and retailing was blurred. The third largest category was that of professional workers, with slightly more lawyers and doctors than teachers and dentists. There were 16 in this group, and taking the first three categories together, as representing essential parts of the commercial life of the city, they provided 78 out of the 98 occupations - the overwhelming majority.

The fourth largest category, with 12, was those people who were associated with large scale industry rather than small scale manufacturing. Most of these were managers, but a couple, such as Betteman of Triumph and J.D. Siddeley of Armstrong-Siddeley, were managing directors. Considering the importance of industry in the city, this group was underrepresented among the ruling coalition, particularly as those who did come into this category did not provide leadership within the group, which came from retailers, dealers and small scale manufacturers.

The 98 did not include any women, nor any manual workers of any kind. It was dominated by the "shopocracy" and the social composition of the group as a whole could not have changed much since the mid nineteenth century.⁽²⁾ This meant that by the 1920s and 1930s the coalition had only a very small social base; a few thousand retailers, manufacturers and professionals were represented by many, while the tens of thousands of engineering workers had no representatives.

Commercial interests did not restrict themselves to the City Council, but dominated all the public institutions in the city, and because of the small numbers of the ruling group, many people took on a number of roles. Thus, it was to be expected that many of the officers of the Chamber of Commerce would be Councillors, and this was the case.⁽³⁾ Although this

body was also dominated by retailers, merchants and small manufacturers, it brought this Commerce group into contact with the employers, through meetings and through encouraging industrialists to take up honorary posts. As its Vice-President also included local gentry such as Colonel Wyley, who ran a chemists' business and on his death donated land to the city, county figures, and M.Ps., together with Sir Edward Iliffe, owner of the Midland Daily Telegraph, the Chamber played an important role in cementing relationships and alliances. Bodies affiliated to it included trade organisations such as the Master Butchers' Association, the Licensed Victuallers Association and the Master Builders' Association. These three bodies have been cited because during this period at least some of their leaders served on the City Council.⁽⁴⁾

Membership of the City Council gave access to a certain amount of patronage when dealing with Council contracts, and there was a strong feeling on the part of the Labour opposition that many of the goods and services supplied to the Council came from the commercial element that ran it. These suspicions could not for the most part be proven, though the relationship between certain builders who were councillors and also involved in the construction of the Stoke Heath estate during the war was an illuminating case.⁽⁵⁾ But patronage was not confined to the Council. Sir Thomas White's Charity had extensive funds, and while most of the money was used for education, loans could be made to people setting up in business. The fund was controlled by a board of trustees responsible to the Council.⁽⁶⁾

Commercial leaders also exercised influence by being Freemen's trustees, for lists of trustees in the 1920s and 1930s reveal that many councillors and ex-councillors were included. Freemen - trained craftsmen - had played an important part in shaping the social and economic life of the

city in the 19th century, and the existence of an institution that gave legal rights and some financial protection to skilled workers had been important in preventing Coventry workers from embracing Chartism and trade unionism. Moreover, by encouraging craft trades it slowed down the development of large scale industry in the city.⁽⁷⁾ Once 'big business' had arrived the institution of the Freeman no longer had the same importance. But the office of Trustee gave status, while the Trustees still had to administer funds, both for pensions and loans and gifts for people wishing to start new businesses.

These charities helped to bring the commercial leaders in the city into a paternalist relationship with some working people. This was strengthened by the work of two other institutions, the Coventry Savings Bank and the Coventry Permanent Economic Building Society, both of which were aimed at working people. The Bank had among its trustees Thomas Burbidge who was Chairman or Vice-Chairman for many years, and who served on many other charities and was a Governor of the Grammar School. He and his family controlled the Coventry Standard, a weekly newspaper that supported the Conservatives, throughout this period. Another trustee was Alderman Goate, a Conservative solicitor. In 1921 the list of managers of the bank included no less than 24 ministers of religion, as well as a large number of councillors and aldermen, and representatives of local industry.

The success of the bank is not known, as there are few surviving records, but the rapid extension of the influence of the Coventry Permanent Economic Building Society was an important feature of the 1920s and 1930s. The Society had been established in 1884, "to promote habits of thrift and independence amongst the Industrial classes, and especially to encourage

and assist every man to become his own landlord." (8) The "industrial classes" were not expected to control it, however, for an investor had to have at least £500 in shares before he was eligible to stand as a director. The Society made rapid progress throughout the inter-war period. Although a couple of hard years, such as 1920 and 1928/29 saw only low growth, the number of investors and borrowers went up consistently. In 1918 there were only 2,789 investors in the Society, but by 1939 there were 21,314. (9) This last figure represented about 40% of the families in the city. The Society must have had investors from outside Coventry, but also some Coventry people must have invested in other societies.

The increase in the number of people who took out mortgages from the Society was even greater, though the total was smaller. In 1928 there were 2,776 borrowers, about one for every four investors. In 1939 there were 10,839 borrowers, one for just under every two investors. (10) There is no automatic conclusion to be drawn from the discovery that at least some working people were buying their own houses while many more were saving to do so, but the circumstances in which this activity took place is significant. The building society was part of a network of philanthropic and charitable institutions under the influence of the commercial leadership of the city that had developed the art of encouraging working people to imitate them and accept their values.

Despite the breakdown of the craft industries and the emergence of a massive working class, this moral and political leadership was carried on for most of this period.

Sir Thomas White's Charity was the largest in the city, and it is worth considering the composition of the board of Trustees in 1931. There

were five people who controlled its considerable funds, all of them pillars of the community. One was Sir Edward Iliffe, owner of the Midland Daily Telegraph, and later of a range of newspapers including the Birmingham Post. Iliffe had been Controller of the Machine Tools Department of the Ministry of Munitions for part of the war, was active in the local Chamber of Commerce, and became President of the Association of British Chambers of Commerce in 1932, was President of the Periodical Proprietors Associations from 1935 to 1938, and Conservative M.P. for Tamworth from 1923 to 1929. The second Trustee was Hugh Rotherham, one of the family that controlled the largest watch-making company in the city, and also active in the Chamber of Commerce. Third was Edward French, head of a company that produced textiles and textile machinery. He was a councillor or alderman throughout this period, a leader of the Coalition, and was President of the Coventry Liberal Party from 1921 to 1928. The fourth Trustee was William Wyley, head of a family chemist business, Chairman of the Governors at the Grammar School, Vice-President of the Chamber of Commerce, and founder and Chairman of the City Guild Society, a religious body. He first joined the City Council in 1876 as an independent, and was made Mayor in 1911 despite not being a member of the Council at the time. He was the last person to be elected to be an alderman without being a councillor, and remained an alderman till he died in 1940 without being a member of any of the political parties. The final Trustee was Alec Turner who controlled a watch-making business. He was a Freeman's Trustee, a Governor of Bablake School, a trustee of the General Municipal Charities, (which brought together a number of smaller charities) Chairman of the Coventry Provident Building Society (a smaller one than the Permanent Economic) and one of the leaders of the Conservative Party on the Council, where he served for 34 years. This group embodied the close relationships that existed between the political, business and

charitable organisations in Coventry.

Other political leaders such as Fred Lee and Vincent Wyles held a number of posts in the community, but a number of people active in charities and education did not contest Council elections. The existence of these other bodies brought councillors and aldermen into close contact with their peers, and encouraged the development of a coherent commercial voice in the running of the city, and a strong social base for it. With the exception of a couple of councillors who became Freeman's Trustees, the Labour group had no say in any of the bodies mentioned, and this must mean that there was a definite policy of exclusion working.

The existence of a cohesive commercial leadership, dominating all aspects of public life in the city, and without a serious challenge to its control since the weavers' movement ended in the 1860s did not prevent the formation of the two main political parties in Coventry, both based on the commercial group. Liberal and Conservative or Tory parties had existed throughout the nineteenth century: originally the Liberal Party had had a strong radical influence and had captured the votes of many working people. However, it usually managed to return its candidate as M.P. By the time of the First World War, the M.P. was still a Liberal, though he was soon rejected by the Party for his pacifist views, but locally it was not possible to make anything other than a fine distinction in the policies of the two parties, and in the social composition of the leadership, though the Liberal Party still had a nonconformist tinge. Both parties, however, had their share of manufacturers, retailers and professionals.

Although the Liberals had the M.P., locally the largest party before and after the war was the Conservative Party. Lack of differences of

principle did not prevent fierce contests in the municipal elections, and these often led to a great deal of public interest. In the 1912 elections, before all workers had the local franchise, the percentage of votes cast in those wards where there was a contest came to 71.9%.⁽¹¹⁾ However, only seven out of twelve wards had such contests. The extent of party influence can be judged by the fact that only one independent candidate was elected in the three years before the war. In 1911, the Coventry Standard reported on the municipal elections that

"All of them (the candidates) came forward under the Party aegis, and fought under the Party colours, and the result can fairly be claimed as a Party victory for the Conservatives."
(12)

The paper went on to say that this result was what it had wanted, but clearly made the point that was disputed later, that Party politics existed in the City many years before the main challenge came from the Labour Party. Before 1914 the Conservatives had twice as many councillors and aldermen as did the Liberals, and as there were not major policy differences relations between the two parties were mostly informal. However, in 1913 a cloud no bigger than a man's hand appeared on the horizon, for Labour won three seats on the Council. Interestingly, one of them was not contested, that of Harry Wale, but in All Saint's Ward, Bannington, the Marxist, defeated Councillor Snape, a Liberal who had been on the Council for fifteen years, with the Conservative in third place. The combined votes of the Liberal and Conservative was greater than Bannington's.⁽¹³⁾ The lesson was clear, and led to discussion between the two parties. Prior to this time, the only agreements that appear to have existed was over aldermanic vacancies.

Before any more formal arrangements could be reached, war broke out, and although the Labour Party carried on having some meetings, the other two

parties ceased to function altogether. The Liberal Party Annual Report in 1914 stated:

"From the moment war was declared the active propaganda of the Association was suspended, and is at the present moment still in abeyance. While war is being waged the voice of the Party should be silent." (14)

This was no doubt meant to be a moral rebuke to Labour, but it meant that both Liberals and Conservatives were slow at organising for the local elections after the war, despite the fact that they came eleven months after the national election which in Coventry had seen a Conservative victory, the relegation of the official Liberal candidate to a poor third place, and the emergence of a powerful Labour vote.

It was only at the end of September 1919 that the Liberal Municipal Committee agreed that "It was desirable to effect a Party agreement with other Political Organisations with a view of engaging not to nominate opposing candidates," and in October a sub-committee was set up with full powers to meet the Conservatives and "Enter into an agreement upon a basis of equal representation."⁽¹⁵⁾ In fact agreement was reached that the Conservatives would have a free hand with the seven seats they were defending, and the Liberals would be given the other five. The parties also agreed that where they were not contesting seats they would give "material official support" to each other.

Whatever the reason, the 1919 municipal elections were an unpleasant shock for the two established parties. For the first time Labour contested most seats, and although there was some confusion on the Labour side, there was also confusion in the opposition. One seat was not contested and therefore given to Labour. Despite the agreement the vote was split in Stoke, and a number of people stood as either Independents or Business. At

the same time, the Labour vote grew considerably, and totalled more than the two other parties put together. Labour won six seats plus Swanswell, where Alice Arnold stood as an Independent against the official Co-op candidate. The two major parties collected only two seats.

In 1920 a similar agreement between the two parties was arranged, and this gave the Liberals more seats than the Conservatives. The two parties were able to re-establish dominance at the polls, but the three Labour gains were at the expense of the Conservatives, so in 1921 it was agreed to give more seats to that party. The aim therefore was to have equal numbers on the Council, and agreements took place over aldermanic vacancies. From 1922 at the latest, the two parties were acting together as one ruling party, though still keeping separate organisations on the Council.

In 1923 closer formal relations developed which were to merge the two parties on the Council. A draft "compact" was drawn up between the two bodies, and a number of meetings took place around it. In April 1923 agreement was reached on a number of important points. One was that both parties would refuse to recognise Independent candidates, and that they would not be let into any caucus meeting until they had renounced every other affiliation. (This was designed to deal with the intervention of a small number of candidates who refused to accept the agreements.) It was also agreed that future elections of aldermen should be based on seniority between the members of the two parties only, and that any vacancy thus created on the Council should go to the party which had the minority of Councillors. Dealing with Labour, the agreement said

"That in the event of the Executives of the Liberal and Conservative Parties being of the opinion that any Labour representative has strong claims to an Aldermanic seat then a Conference shall be held to consider the position."

The other items in the agreement dealt with which wards the different parties would contest in 1923 and 1924, but these turned out to be contentious, as several candidates were reluctant to withdraw on instructions. Not until October 1st 1923 was a slightly amended version of the "compact" signed, by Lee, Wyles and Halpin for the Conservatives and French and Snape for the Liberals.⁽¹⁶⁾

The compact was strengthened in 1924. It was agreed that where a party secured an extra alderman, it should have the right to fill the vacancies left on any committees.⁽¹⁷⁾ In mid July 1924 it was put to the test for the first time, and only just survived. A vacancy arose for an aldermanic post, and it was discovered that the longest serving Councillor was a Labour member, Harry Wale. Nevertheless, the Conservatives put up Councillor Bates, who had one year's less service. This put the Liberals in a difficult position, for they had no animosity to Wale. After his election to the Council in 1910, Wale was not opposed in any other election by the main parties. He was elected unopposed in 1913 and in 1920 and 1923 opposed only by the SLP. In 1923 after his easy re-election the Midland Daily Telegraph commented

"It is a fact that speaks volumes of the way in which they are regarded that in their contests both Mr. Wale and Mr. Moseley had the good wishes of a very large number of people who in political matters are of decidedly different schools of thought."
(18)

Moseley and Arnold were the only other Labour Councillors left at that stage, and the only ones opposed by the other parties. Faced with the prospect of refusing Wale an aldermanship, the Liberal Municipal Committee called a special meeting. French, the Chairman of the Party, stated the position:

"The existing compact between ourselves and the Unionists would be endangered and probably regarded as broken if we did not support Counc. Bates.

The weight of opinion however was that Councillor Wale's claims were the stronger, that public opinion would be against us if we failed to recognise his claims and that it was doubtful whether the Unionist Party would regard our support of Councillor Wale as a breach of the existing Compact." (19)

In the event, although the Joint Committee of the two party leaders recommended Bates, at least some of the Liberals broke ranks, for Wale was elected as the first Labour alderman. However, the compact survived, and a month later was again strengthened.

In September 1924 a new clause to the compact was added, stating that when vacancies arose for "Governorships of Schools and Institutions, Charity Trusteeships etc," the Joint Negotiating Committee (of party leaders) would be empowered to choose a new candidate, and Liberal and Conservative members of the Council would then support him. This was significant in that it gave more power to the half dozen members of the Joint Negotiating Committee, and more important showed that far from the Council being run by non-political groups, the various charitable institutions in the city were seen by the political parties as a legitimate area for party organisation.⁽²⁰⁾ At the same time an attempt was made to ensure that all party members stuck to the compact, for another clause stated:-

"That the assent of new councillors should be obtained to the various clauses of the pact and that the support of the Liberal and Conservative organisations at elections shall be dependent on such agreement." (21)

The next stage was to try to reach an accommodation with Labour. Initially Wale turned down an agreement on elections, but after he had become an alderman, further discussions took place.⁽²²⁾ At a meeting

with Wale and Moseley, it was agreed that the election of aldermen should be by seniority and not by party, and that when a Councillor retired or died, his party should have the first choice in filling the vacancies created on Committees. However, no agreement was reached on the election of Mayors, nor on any arrangements about the election of councillors.

The result of the agreements between the Liberals and Conservatives was to finally ensure that a united front was put forward in Municipal elections against Labour, and that the two parties achieved a balance on the Council. This had happened by November 1924. After the elections, there were 12 Liberal Councillors, 15 Conservative Councillors, 2 independent, and 3 Labour Councillors. The most important result of the agreement however was that it paved the way to a more public coalition of the two ruling parties. This came in November 1928, when after boundary changes, all seats on the Council were elected simultaneously. For the first time, the candidates of the two ruling parties stood not in their party colours, but as members of the Coalition, and this title was used until 1937, when the Progressive Party was formed.

This formal Coalition was a natural development, though still unusual as the two parties had separate existences and fought against each other in the General Elections. Although there are only a few records of the two parties for this period, it seems likely that the Coalition was formed largely because of the decline of the Liberal Party. The election after the war had been a disaster for the Liberals, with the official Liberal candidate getting less than half of the Labour vote, and less than a quarter of the Conservative vote. Although Liberal Council members met regularly, there was virtually no activity in the local party for several years. Only after French accepted the post of President did the Party begin to recover.

In December 1921 there was the first election of officers since before the war, and attempts began to reorganise ward branches. A full time agent was appointed in 1922, but he had to go part-time in 1923 due to the shortage of funds.⁽²³⁾ Financial problems dogged the Liberals throughout the 1920s. For the 1924 General Election, the Party spent £1,233 which was £76 less than the Conservatives, but substantially more than Labour, which could only afford £844.⁽²⁴⁾ A few years later the Party again compared its finances unfavourably with the Conservatives. The Balance Sheet for 1926 showed a Liberal Income of £203 and an expenditure of £290. The Conservatives clearly had richer patrons, for 40 subscribers gave them £800, and other subscribers gave £376, and £200 was drawn from the reserves to give total expenditure of £1,376. The Liberals were so distressed at their own relative weakness that it was resolved "It would scarcely be in the interests of Liberalism in Coventry, to publish typed or printed copies of the Balance Sheet."⁽²⁵⁾

The Party also did not have the best of luck with Parliamentary candidates. J.E. Dainton was selected as candidate in 1922, but only against strong opposition, as many felt that this would be delivering the seat up to Labour. In fact in the 1922 election the Liberals vote recovered, but Dainton still finished bottom of the poll. A new candidate, this time H.P. Gisborne, was not selected in 1923 until a month before the election. Under these circumstances he did well, coming within 6 votes of the Conservative candidate, but both of them were over 600 votes behind A.A.Purcell, the first Labour M.P. for the city. Unfortunately Gisborne did not keep up his early promise for in 1926 the Liberal Advisory Committee agreed to the blunt sentiment that "Mr. Gisborne is a hopeless candidate for Coventry and that it is impossible, with so little interest shown by the candidate,

to work up any enthusiasm in the Party," and French was given the job of getting rid of him.⁽²⁶⁾ Gisborne was eventually prevailed upon to write a letter of resignation, which stated,

"That in view of the political situation, especially in Coventry - namely, the strong Conservative organisation and the equally strong, if not stronger, Labour organisation, the prospects of a Liberal being returned for Coventry for some years to come are absolutely hopeless."
(27)

His resignation was accepted and an attempt was made to find a successor, but in September 1927 a further meeting was held where:

"The opinion of all present was that it was practically a hopeless task and waste of money to endeavour to fight the next election in Coventry, unless we were provided with a well-known outstanding politician." (28)

In fact, finance was more important than getting someone outstanding, and French nearly secured a candidate who would have been prepared to pay the local Party £250 per annum. This was his last act as President, for he decided to resign, and this brought the Party to a further crisis. In May 1928 a meeting was called of all alderman and councillors, as "It appears to be a question of the continuance or the collapse of the Coventry Liberal Association."⁽²⁹⁾ Eventually the Party was able to persuade Arthur Young, manager of the BTH and a firm believer in dynamic management to accept the Presidency. However, no more candidates were put up in the General Elections in this period, and it may not be a coincidence that this crisis in the Liberal Party was followed by the formation of the Coalition.

The continuing weaknesses of the Liberals meant that the original agreement with the Conservatives was signed by the Liberal Council members without reference to the rest of the Association. When it came up for a renewal in 1925 some members of the Association attacked the Council members for not taking enough interest in the wards or work of the Association.

Alderman Makepeace replied

"If the Pact were broken, it would be goodbye to the Liberal Party on the Council. The members of the Council are not found or assisted when necessary by the Executive. Candidates for the Council had been found by personal help and influence of individuals." (30)

Thus the Liberal Party got more out of the Pact than did the Conservatives, but when the two formed the Coalition, the Conservatives were the major part of that alliance. By the 1930s the Liberal tradition in the city had shrunk to near insignificance. The mass of its voters had deserted to the Labour candidates, while those who were left in the Party were tailing behind the Conservatives.

The challenge from Labour had succeeded in all but welding together the two older parties, but it was found to be more difficult to get a wedding between commerce and industry, that is, in getting the engineering employers to throw their full weight behind the Coalition. The CDEEA, although sympathetic to the Coalition candidates, refused to support any action directly emanating from a political party. In 1923 when the Executive Committee of the Association was informed that two employers, F.J. Shoton of Albion Drop Forges, and J.D. Siddeley were standing in the local elections, it was agreed to help them as much as possible, although one was a Liberal and the other a Conservative.⁽³¹⁾ Nevertheless the Association refused to give Strickland, the Conservative candidate, an opportunity to speak in factories prior to the 1931 General Election, nor would it be in any way associated with his campaign.⁽³²⁾ The only concession given was that Varley was given permission to act in his personal capacity to campaign for the National Government for

"It was desirable that everyone who could do so should lend their support to the organisation which stood for Law and Order in the country." (33)

Despite its reluctance to become involved with party politics, the Association was always prepared to consider how best it could increase the number of industrial representatives on the City Council, and a number of discussions were held in this period on the problem, usually after representations had been made by existing members of the City Council. Thus in 1922 the Association secretary reported that,

"He had recently been approached by Councillor Victor Dodd with a view to the Engineering Manufacturers of Coventry submitting themselves as candidates for election on the Coventry City Council in November next.

A very full discussion followed on this matter, and it was agreed that it might be beneficial if a mass meeting of all classes of local manufacturers (not limited to the Engineering Industry) could be held so that full consideration could be given to this matter." (34)

The Board Room of the Association was made available for such a meeting, but nothing came of it. In the mid-1920s the decline of the Labour Party at the local polls seemed to satisfy local industry, but in 1930 a more serious attempt was made to deal with the situation. In October the Chairman of the CDEEA, Mr.G.A. Lister from M.L.Magneto, at an executive meeting,

"Stated that the Manufacturers had little voice in discussion on matters of interest to Employers in the City Council meetings, and suggested that the time had come for Manufacturers to consider offering themselves for election to the City Council."

It was eventually resolved

"That a communication be sent by the President to the Chairman and/or Managing Directors of firms, requesting that they do all they can to interest some official connected with them in the affairs of the City." (36)

At the next meeting, the executive of the Association considered a letter from W.H. Malcolm, who was one of the few who had been prepared to be a Councillor while working for a major concern - GEC - who pointed out that Labour representation on the Council had risen from 3 to 16 in

the last few years and Varley was urged to take action on behalf of the CDEEA. The fact that action was taken in 1930, after some good results for Labour make it clear, as does the letter from Malcolm, that this was an attempt to stop Labour rather than to get more industrial representation on the Council. In March a meeting of Managing Directors was held, and according to Lister "It had been agreed by all present that the time had arrived for definite steps to be taken in this matter." Three possible steps had been put forward: the Managing Directors themselves could stand as candidates; they could nominate members of their staff to stand as representatives of industry, or the third alternative was to find "professional gentlemen" who worked for industrial concerns to agree to stand.⁽³⁷⁾

A few months later "certain members" of the Council again approached the Association. Varley reported that

"Whilst some steps had been made with regard to professional gentlemen in the town seeking representation on the City Council, no steps had been taken to meet the position by securing Manufacturers who are willing to submit themselves for election."

It was finally agreed that the best approach was "for firms to arrange for some responsible official of their staff to take on this work."⁽³⁸⁾

The series of meetings gave ample proof of the fact that the CDEEA looked with interest on the work of the City Council, and was alarmed by Labour progress, but they also show that Managing Directors were not prepared to come forward to intervene, nor could they find members of their management who could be prevailed upon, for the good of the company, to seek election. The discussions in 1930 had no noticeable effect on the type of the candidates standing for the Coalition in the years to come.

Without more active support from the engineering employers, the Coalition group was finding the going increasingly tough. Throughout

the 1930s the Labour Party made steady but unspectacular progress, and this led to some demoralisation in the Coalition ranks. It may have been that the lack of competition between the two traditional parties led to a general reduction in interest and political activity, or it may have been that the ruling Coalition group did not choose to work in conjunction with the ward associations of the political parties, but in any event, the Coalition group found it difficult to get sufficient candidates to put up against Labour. In 1934 they had to make another approach to the CDEEA, and Varley reported to the Executive that he had found two people to stand for the Coalition and negotiations were in hand for two more that were needed.⁽³⁸⁾ In the event, neither Varley nor the Coalition leaders were able to find candidates, and one of the names that Varley had produced dropped out, giving Labour three uncontested seats in the elections that year. The next year, when a further approach was made, Varley referred to "The difficulty in persuading suitable candidates to come forward who could devote the necessary time for this work." G.E. Roberts, who was a Councillor and worked for Coventry Malleable, stressed the need to oppose Labour, for if it came to office it was expected "To grant concessions to the domestic consumers of Gas, Electricity etc. at the expense of the industrial consumers." Again it was agreed to try to find suitable candidates, to stand as Coalition members, not as members of the CDEEA."⁽³⁹⁾

The reference to gas and electricity utilities gives an illustration of the way the CDEEA was able to influence the City Council, even though it could not provide Councillors. At a Council meeting at the end of 1935, W.M. Malcolm, who was the Chairman of the Electricity Committee reported that as the concern had showed a profit of about £15,000 there ought to be a cut in the charges for bulk users, which would amount to about half the

profit. This suggestion was strongly attacked by Labour, and T.J. Harris successfully moved a reference back, when he claimed

"There is a very important principle involved, and this is whether (company) shareholders are to have precedence over the general welfare of the citizens and of sound finance."

He claimed that bulk users were already only paying 75% of the rate charged to domestic users, and said that the proposal was a result of an appeal from the CDEEA. Malcolm denied this, and said there had been no discussion with the CDEEA but that cheap electricity would attract firms and jobs to the city.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Although the reference back was carried, the proposal was accepted at a later meeting. At the February 1936 meeting of the executive of the CDEEA, the reduction of charges was mentioned, and a resolution of thanks to Malcolm was passed, as the meeting acknowledged that it was mainly his actions that had led to the proposal. G.E. Roberts was also thanked by the executive for his part in getting the proposal through the City Council.⁽⁴¹⁾ Roberts was a member of the executive for most of the period, and on another matter a couple of months earlier had intervened in a discussion to say

"That as a member of the City Council, he felt confident that the manufacturers would appreciate that the Council had never displayed any action which was likely to impede industry in any form."⁽⁴²⁾

With such protectors on the Council, it was not necessary for the Association to make special appeals to protect its interests, except in unusual circumstances such as the passing of the Coventry Corporation Act of 1936. The Association objected to the discovery that under the Bill it would need only 3 "disgruntled" householders to sign a complaint against a firm to take it to a magistrate's court to prove that it could not reduce its noise levels. A special sub-committee was able to report that it had got the Town Clerk to make amendments to the offending clause.⁽⁴³⁾

There was a possibility that the Labour Party would win enough seats in 1936 to take control of the Council. When it failed to do so it was clear that unless the Coalition made unexpected progress it would lose power in 1937. This led to a hasty reassessment. The Coalition had campaigned on the policy that it was free of what it called national politics, or as the Midland Daily Telegraph explained; the existence of Liberal and Conservative parties in the Coalition had "No real political significance." It went on,

"The main value of the respective labels was the existence of two political organisations which could be drawn upon, even if surreptitiously, for municipal election purposes." (44)

But the use of these organisations got more surreptitious as time went by. Looking at the election results in 1936 the Telegraph complained that Labour had an advantage because it had central organisation, and a planned and worked out policy, something the Coalition obviously lacked:

"In recent years the Coalition has attempted to meet this Socialist organisation by placing in the field candidates whose names have been unknown to their constituents until a few days prior to nomination day. Elections have been fought on hastily-recruited ward committees, their organisation dependent upon the varying enthusiasm of individual candidates, and the degree of support they have been able to command among their personal friends." (45)

The Coalition itself, in its election address had bitterly attacked the existence of an efficient Labour Party, claiming for themselves, that

"The majority of the members of the City Council, and also these candidates, do not represent the political interests of a party: nor have such interests entered into the conduct of city affairs with their consent."

How this statement was reconciled with the habit of the Coalition of still sharing out Council and Charitable posts on a party basis is not known.

The address then went on to ask,

"Can you afford to elect a Councillor who is subordinate to and who takes his instructions from, an outside body of persons - from a party responsible to itself alone and not to the voters." (46)

The Coalition was suffering from acute jealousy. As the Midland Daily Telegraph had intimated, the Coalition would have used party organisation had it survived. As it was, the final attempt to resist Labour was to create a new party called the Progressive Party.

II Education in Coventry

Before pursuing the fortunes of the Progressive Party, an illustration of the nature of Coalition rule can be given by a study of the development of the educational system of the city. This gives an indication of the power the Coalition had to depress the quality of life for working people and to pursue elitist aims that benefited the narrow social groups that supported the Coalition.

With the exception of technical education, the City Council was reluctant to spend more than was strictly necessary on the educational system, particularly on the elementary schools. They had serious consequences as the rapid growth in the population put tremendous pressure on the schools. Table 3 shows the number of elementary school places in the city, and the number of school children.

Table Three Number of elementary school children on the books, and the number of elementary school places available.

<u>Year</u>	<u>No. on books</u>	<u>Accommodation</u>
1914	18,105	17,331
1915	18,600	17,381
1916	19,221	17,581
1917	19,536	17,631
1918	20,038	17,841
1919	20,175	17,841
1920	20,464	17,841
1921	20,825	18,225
1922	21,427	21,271

Source: Coventry Education Department Annual Reports, 1921 and 1928.

The accommodation was based on the assumption that there would be no more than 60 children in a class, and some of the room was provided by temporary army huts. In practice, the figures understated the problem, for children were kept off the books until they were older. Not until 1928 were there more places than children, and the situation deteriorated again in the years just before the war.

The result was overcrowding. This meant accommodating children in unpleasant and unsuitable schools that should have been closed down. One such school was St. Peter's Church of England School near the centre of the city. It was in the parish of the Rev. Paul Stacy a prominent Christian Socialist, who when he first saw it described it as "a most unwelcome and unexpected surprise."⁽⁴⁷⁾ A Board of Education architect reported in 1919 that "the school possesses so many fundamental defects that it would be bad policy to attempt to remedy them."⁽⁴⁸⁾ During the war the "Late Head Master refrained from requisitioning books partly on patriotic grounds and partly to leave his successor a free hand."⁽⁴⁹⁾ The Board of Education asked for the school to be closed down in 1915, but it stayed open until 1930 as there was no alternative accommodation. At the time of its closure seven out of the fifteen Church of England schools in the city were on the Board of Education black list, that is, the Board did not approve of their continued existence and would not support them in any way.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Not all of Coventry's schools were this bad but many children suffered until the 1930s due to inadequate accommodation.

Overcrowding also meant large classes. In 1924 41 classes in elementary schools had more than 60 children, while there was a total of 254 classes with more than 50 children.⁽⁵¹⁾ It was not until the late 1920s that numbers were substantially reduced. They went up again in 1938,

due to the next wave of migration. While an increasing population put extra claims on the resources of the city, it is clear that the main reason for the failure to deal with overcrowding in Coventry was the refusal of the Council to spend. There were fewer teachers per child in Coventry compared with the average for the County Boroughs in England and Wales, and less was spent on them, as Table ^{Four}~~Three~~ shows.

Table Four Comparison of Teachers and Salary Costs.

	<u>1926/7</u>	
	Teachers per 100 pupils in average attendance	Salary cost per pupil
Coventry	26.6	141s 4d
County Boroughs	30.1	161s 8d
	<u>1930/1</u>	
Coventry	30.2	155s 1d
County Boroughs	32.1	168s 7d

Source: Board of Education Public Elementary Schools in England and Wales 1927 and 1931.

The gap between average expenditure and Coventry's expenditure widened dramatically when it came to secondary education. A comparison of expenditure on free places and grant between Coventry and the County Boroughs as a whole is given below:

Table Five: Expenditure on free places and grants.

	<u>Per 1000 of the population</u>	<u>Per unit of average attendance</u>
	<u>1923/4</u>	
Coventry	£8 14s 0d	1s 2d
County Boroughs	£14 14s 0d	2s 2d
	<u>1926/7</u>	
Coventry	£4 6s 0d	7d
County Boroughs	£14 15s 0d	2s 2d

Source: Coventry Higher Education Sub-Committee Minutes, June 1925 and May 1928.

The main reason for the very marked difference in the above figures was the use of charitable funds. Fred Lee, for many years Chairman of the Education Committee spelt this out:

"A further aspect of the situation was that the cost of secondary education of boys in the City to the ratepayers was nil. They had never had to bear the cost of a Council secondary school for boys. The secondary education of boys had been defrayed by past benefactors. They were unique in any City of their size and importance...Supplementary to that, in fifty years of technical education in the City the only capital expenditure on technical education had been £6,000. They sent annually to the universities 12 to 15 boys and girls from monies left by benefactors. Then there was the large estate belonging to the Freeman, valued at £100,000 administered for educational and pensional purposes, together with the estate of Sir Thomas White...." (52)

This favourable position was seized on to sustain a tradition of paying less for education than most other cities. Ratepayers benefited, but their children did not. The existence of the charities also created an imbalance between the poorly supported primary, elementary and publicly owned secondary schools, and the two privately owned boys secondary schools. From 1919 the city had two girls secondary schools, both converted with additional facilities built on, and both very quickly became overcrowded. An Inspector's report on Stoke Park girls school in 1922 stated

"The accommodation is overcrowded and the School has already reached its utmost limit of expansion in the premises as they are...the accommodation is severely strained and there is a sixth form with no other home for its work than a passage." (53)

In 1936 Stoke Parish rooms were let for the school, and a year later temporary huts were put up. The position at Barrs Hill girls school was little better. The school had originally been the home of J.K Starley, but was expected to house 436 girls by the 1930s in cramped conditions and lacking many facilities. It appears that the charities existed to support boys' education, and the girls had to make do with the Education Committee.

While this meant that the boys schools were better off for land and facilities, it also meant that it was easier for a girl to get secondary education in Coventry than it was for a boy. King Henry VIII Grammar School was independent, charged high fees, yet was not able for most of this period to achieve the standards expected of it, or at least to acquire a reputation that made parents seek it out. While the rest of the education system in Coventry was bursting at the seams in the years after the war, the Grammar school had less than 200 boys, and this figure included a preparatory section. Reporting on the unsatisfactory results from the Grammar School, an Inspector commented on

"The failure of King Henry VIII to appeal to the wealthiest of the inhabitants and no marked superiority in standard of attainment."

He went on to link its problems with those of the other independent boys secondary school, Bablake School:

"It seems very unlikely that King Henry VIII on its present course will supply Coventry with a First Grade School, and Bablake with its present Assistant Staff and its large classes have a very long way to travel in the Humanities before it gets in sight of a position of this kind." (54)

Bablake School appealed to the social forces that made up the Coalition in Coventry - it was their school. As it was the Coalition that ran the Education Committee, this meant effectively that Bablake was financed and administered by the city, but was still formally an independent school and could therefore reserve places for the sons of the Coalition. After the war the school faced financial difficulties although its capital expenditure programme was covered by the charities. The Education Committee gave it substantial grants in the early 1920s with no strings attached. Most of the Governors of Bablake came from either the trustees of the General Municipal Charities or were elected

by the City Council. As some of the Coalition Councillors were also trustees about half of the Governors were councillors or aldermen. The city's Director of Education, Harrod, was also a Governor.

There were similar links between the Coalition and the Grammar School. When the school asked for a grant to meet its deficit in 1919 12 of the 17 Governors were either aldermen or councillors or were appointed by the City Council.⁽⁵⁵⁾ In the 1920s, when money was made available to the Grammar School, there were normally conditions attached, unlike the grants made to Bablake. The Grammar School was seen as an ancient foundation that catered for the county, while the more humble Bablake School was good enough for the sons of the Coalition.

This fiction of independence allowed the Coalition to run the schools without too close regard for the educational needs of the city. As Councillors the Coalition would arrange examinations to determine who could go to secondary school and provide free places or maintenance allowances. As Governors, the Coalition would ensure that many of the children who passed the examinations were not given places, and that places would be provided for children purely on the basis of their parents' ability to pay. In 1937 there were 172 special places made available to girls at the two maintained secondary schools. (Special places meant that they were either free or reduced in fee). There were only 40 special places available at the two independent boys schools.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Lack of places for children from working class homes created a peculiar form of selection. Up until 1932 headmasters made all of their pupils take tests in English and Arithmetic. The top ten per cent would then be put into a second examination which was to see who would get the limited number of places available.⁽⁵⁷⁾ The system suffered due to the lack of

external examiners and therefore a lack of standardisation in the marking, but a more serious defect was that it had built into it the assumption that 90 per cent of the children were not up to the standard of secondary education, and that only half of those that were judged to be of this standard actually got places. The need to preserve an elite and protect the privileges of the Coalition was the basis of the system of selection, instead of educational policy. The examination system was changed in 1932, when it was necessary for children to take only one paper, but entrance into the examination was no longer compulsory.

In the 1920s, only a very small number of free places were made available in the boys' secondary schools - sometimes as few as 12 or 15. In the 1930s it rose a little, but was never more than 40. This was an extreme form of streaming, and it paid off insofar as examination results were concerned - a very high proportion of boys with free places did well in the school certificates.⁽⁵⁸⁾ But in 1936/7 about 60 per cent of all secondary school places for boys in the County Boroughs were assisted, while the figure for Coventry was only 40 per cent.⁽⁵⁹⁾ It was more difficult for a working class boy to get a secondary education in Coventry than almost anywhere else in the country.

Most of the money that was needed to pay for free places, or make an allowance against the cost of secondary education came from the charities. However, the low amount of expenditure needed served to encourage the authority to preserve a parsimonious attitude to the small sums that it did give out. An example of the way Coventry was lagging behind many other authorities was the outcry over the implementation of Circular 1421, which did away with free places and replaced them with means tested allowances. Its object was to reduce public expenditure, and it provoked much

hostility from many councils where this happened. In Coventry the limits for the new means test were more generous than the limits for the free places had been, and expenditure on allowances rose as soon as the new scheme was introduced.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Coventry's payments prior to this circular had been as low as had been legally possible, and after the circular it continued to base itself on the lowest possible figures.

Several years after the circular had been introduced, Harrod reported that the allowance system in the city was inferior to others:

"Investigation has proved that the scales of neighbouring areas, including rural areas, where living conditions are less expensive, are more generous in their assistance to parents than those obtaining in Coventry."

He concluded that Coventry's scales "Appear to work inequitably on the parents of children residing in Coventry."⁽⁶¹⁾ The changes that were made as a result only brought the Coventry payments closer to those of nearby authorities, and certainly did not surpass them.

Capital expenditure on schools was also low for almost the whole of this period. Coventry tried to carry through the reorganisation of elementary schools in 1926 without building any new premises, and this provoked the Board of Education to summon Harrod up to London to explain the position. A memorandum of the meeting commented,

"One gathered from Mr. Harrod's general remarks that industrially the position at Coventry was far from unsatisfactory. There was, however, an 'economist' element on the Council headed by the Deputy Mayor."

(62)

Harrod summed up the city's reorganisation scheme as "an attempt to make the best of a bad job," and said that no new elementary schools were to be built until a boys' secondary school had been built. Although the Education Committee had resolved that there was an urgent need for a boys

secondary school in 1927 no such school was commenced before the war.

In contrast to a weak elementary system and a small and elitist secondary system, the city had a long tradition of providing technical education for children. By the mid 1930s Coventry had one of the best schemes of technical education in the country, and the contrast between this and the secondary system was marked. Technical education provided an outlet for those boys who had done well in elementary schools but could not be found a secondary school place. It preserved the social distinctions between secondary school pupils and the rest, and it provided the motor and engineering industry with a constant supply of trained youngsters, some of whom would be selected to become apprentices.

Even in depressed trading conditions, there were many vacancies for young workers in the engineering factories; the problems tended to arise when the young reached the age of 21 and expected an adult wage. One of the results of this encouragement of young engineering workers was the specialising in technical education at an early age. In 1919 the Technical College set up a Junior Technical School which took boys from the age of 13 to 15. Many of them then went on to evening classes or day release courses at the Technical College. The classes were very vocational, and it was no surprise to discover that 90 per cent of the pupils went into the engineering industry.⁽⁶³⁾ In addition, some of the elementary schools had advanced courses for boys and girls who wished to stay on an extra year to the age of fifteen. Again, these courses were very vocational. An inspector who visited the John Gulson School in 1921 found that there was a poor supply of books and that the school was weak on literary subjects, but had "done valuable pioneer work in the development of experimental practical education."⁽⁶⁴⁾ These classes, and the classes

at the Junior Technical School were clearly part of the elementary system, and were not allowed to give certificates in case they were seen to be challenging the secondary schools.

After the reorganisation of the elementary schools in the late 1920s, a break was made between junior and senior elementary schools. The Junior Technical School began to take in children from the age of 11 onwards. Because of the existence of this school and the importance given to it, Coventry did not create a selective central school, which was supposed to be an elementary school of an advanced kind, with the children taking examinations. Such a school would cover a range of subjects, but the only advanced elementary education in Coventry was technical education.

A small Technical Institute had been set up in Coventry in 1887, and had expanded after the war. In 1926 it had been upgraded to a Technical College which meant that it could offer Higher National Certificates. It catered almost exclusively for boys who had finished their schooling and who were on either day release courses or evening classes. In 1927 there were 292 day students and 1,117 evening students.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Most of the courses were to do with engineering, and the college was well supported by local employers. In 1928 a Board of Education report commented on the well-established and comparatively widespread system of day release which obviously depended on good relations with the employers.⁽⁶⁶⁾ A further report in 1931 again commented favourably on technical education in the city, and set out as a model the apprentice training scheme run by the College, and which had the support of the CDEEA.⁽⁶⁷⁾ Boys were encouraged to aim for responsible positions at either technical or executive level in local firms, though the majority of course were concerned with craft skills.

The report also pointed out that nationally 90 per cent of engineering

workers came from elementary schools, and that most secondary school children, Technical College students or University students did not end up in the engineering industry. In Coventry it appears that most of the boys and girls at secondary school did avoid the engineering industry, but most of the students at the Technical College, whether full or part time, entered the industry. There were thus three quite separate types of education within the city. The mass of boys and girls got a rudimentary education to the age of 14, and then left to get unskilled jobs; a small minority went into technical training, some of them becoming craft apprentices, some rising to the heights of technical management; finally a very small minority went through the secondary schools to careers mostly outside the engineering industry. This arrangement suited both the employers and the Coalition, notwithstanding the fact that their aims were quite different. Employers were provided with both unskilled labour and youngsters partly trained to be craft, technical or professional workers; the Coalition reinforced its social superiority. Besides to a great extent determining the careers of children the types of education reinforced the existing social structure. There was flexibility between the elementary and the technical - a boy who was prepared to make sacrifices and give up his evenings stood a good chance of getting some sort of technical education - but there was very little flexibility between technical and secondary education, which marked out people with school certificates as likely to have a life in management in a different career to engineering, or in a profession. Most of the engineering employers had come through technical education, and they were not particularly concerned to acquire Grammar school or University students, for their enterprises.

The contrast between the grandiose facade of the new Technical College built in this period and the continued difficulties facing old and over-

crowded elementary schools summarises the priorities of the Education Committee, but it should also be pointed out that the Committee's habit of parsimony was catching, and it took some effort to get the new College. The College was originally to have been built in 1920, but had been the subject of a number of postponements. The capital expenditure plans of 1929 proposed a new College at the cost of £140,000; a Board of Education Official noted that while members of the Education Committee "are the reverse of spendthrift," they were very keen on the College, which was "strongly backed by the industrial interests in the Borough."⁽⁶⁸⁾ Due to the enforced cutback in education spending, the start on the College was put back to 1932. In that year it was again postponed for a time, but a decision was finally taken to go ahead in early 1933. Although the majority of the Coalition group was in favour of going ahead, a strong minority, the "economy group" felt that such large expenditure could not be countenanced during an economic slump. It took all of the Labour votes in the City Council, backing up the leadership of the Education Committee, to get the scheme through. Once the decision had been made, the new College was proceeded with ~~a~~pace, and was in operation by the autumn of 1935. This provoked a comment at the Board of Education;

"Coventry, otherwise quite a good Authority, are so taken up with the project of the erection of a large new Technical College that they are apt to give rather too little attention to the needs of the new housing estates in the way of P.E.S. accommodation; as you know, they have not a particularly good record in the matter of over-large classes."
(69)

Much of the cost of equipping the College was met by local employers, who donated machinery for the workshops. Although the final appearance of the building was somewhat grand, and outdid the appearance of the municipal offices, the prudent leaders of the City Council only allowed the new

building to go ahead because they had not found a suitable empty factory.

In all of their dealings, the Coalition majority on the Education Committee denied that they were engaged in politics. On one occasion, when Labour challenged the appointment of one of the non-council members to the Committee, complaining of a bias against Labour educationalists, Fred Lee, Chairman of the Committee, claimed that party politics was irrelevant, for

"All the years he had been on the Council and the Education Committee politics had not counted in education." (70)

For Labour, Stringer replied, that the Coalition were secretly political. "The only difference was that the Labour Party admitted they were there for a specific purpose." While it is true that there was hypocrisy in the Coalition claim that they were above party politics, it is clear that Lee believed what he said to be true. While presiding over an Education Committee that sought, with some success, to preserve an elitist education system based on the segregation of children into winners and losers, Lee did not consciously pursue party political ends. The fact that so much could be done unconsciously gives an insight into the strength of the Coalition. There was a fixed assumption that such an elitist system was natural. This view was strongly held by national politicians, most educationalists, and probably most people. It influenced the Labour Party, which concerned itself with attacks on the penny-pinching nature of the Educational Committee's expenditure, and did not appear to appreciate that the system of education as a whole served to boost the interests of the Coalition and the employers.

The existence of large scale engineering encouraged the city to develop technical education. The way it was done was left to the Coalition.

which was not intimately concerned with technical education, but more concerned with preserving the status of the boys secondary schools. Technical education got low priority after the war, and only blossomed in the 1930s, after the post-war problems of the secondary schools had been overcome.

The division between employer and Coalition was responsible for the strong economy attitude on the City Council. The commercial viewpoint could at times triumph over the industrial needs of the city, as in the postponement of the Technical College. In the long run the educational system gave both groups what they desired, but all sections of Coventry education were affected by a penny-pinching narrowness of outlook that came from some councillors and aldermen with commercial interests.

III Social Neglect

A reluctance to spend money has been noted as a strong feature of Coalition policy in housing and education. However, this reluctance covered all areas of municipal life.

The Coalition's policy was to intervene as little as possible in the industrial and commercial life of the city, and to provide social services that were in keeping with a hierarchical view. This meant considerable reluctance to extend public services or to plan ahead. However, with a rapidly growing city some innovations had to come, and the Coalition was prepared to build and plan when convinced it was strictly necessary. On some occasions it was divided between those who saw the need to gradually update municipal institutions and strengthen public services, and the "economy" group, mostly shopkeepers and led by Councillors Holbrook

and Payne, whose almost total view of municipal affairs was to keep down the rates. A typical Payne speech took place during a debate in the Council over industrial pollution in Foleshill. Labour speakers had claimed that Courtaulds and Stirling Metal in particular were a nuisance and a public health danger. Payne claimed that the Council already did more than enough to protect its citizens:

"It seems to me that this Council has to be the foster-mother of the child before it is born and until it dies. What are its parents for? You want us to look after its milk, its teeth, education, college grants, and then if it happens to be a bit mental provide it with a grand home. The responsibility is the parents'. So long as the Corporation will relieve them of their obligations, so long will they apply for grants." (71)

Payne's outbursts could be an embarrassment to his own side, but he enjoyed some support, and was successful on a number of occasions in holding up the spending of money.

The majority of the Coalition though reluctant to spend, recognised the inadequacies of the city. In an account of his travels in 1933, J.B. Priestley found Coventry a surprisingly picturesque place:

"You peep round a corner and see half-timbered and gabled houses that would do for the second act of the 'Meistersinger.' In fact you could stage the 'Meistersinger' - or film it - in Coventry. I knew it was an old place - for wasn't there Lady Godiva? - but I was surprised to find how much of the past, in soaring stone and carved wood, still remained in the city." (72)

An editorial in the MDT gave a less romantic view, and passed judgement on the mismanagement of the commercial group:

"Coventry is now emerging from the shackles of a purely utilitarian era, stretching back for a hundred years or more. It has been an era of commercial revolution allied with civic stagnation during which the city has been so intent upon serving the machine that it has given little thought to the service of its people. There are vast arrears to be overtaken, for succeeding generations have contented themselves in seeking solutions to the problems

of the moment, and have given little thought to the future in any other sphere than those of mechanics and invention. Generations of bad planning - or a complete absence of planning - slums, narrow streets, overcrowding, sewers, all the trouble saved up for the present from an unimaginative past, must be tackled." (73)

Perhaps this indictment was so strong because the newspapers contrived to make it an attack on the Rev. Richard Lee, a Labour Councillor, who was complaining of the large sums of money spent on buying land to lay out Hertford Street, one of the few central improvements that took place. But Lee was complaining of the high prices paid for the land rather than at the reform itself. Labour usually felt that when the Council went in for this sort of operation, the people who dealt with it made excessive profits.

Another area of comparative neglect was the public libraries. When an opportunity to build a new library arose in 1936 with the sale of the County Hall, Frederick Smith wrote to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government:

"The Public Library was presented to the City by a citizen named Mr. John Gulson as long ago as 1890 when the population of Coventry was only about 50,000. Except for comparatively minor internal adaptations, it has not been possible to improve the Library since, though in the meantime the population of the City has grown until it is now very nearly 200,000." (74)

At this time the city had only four branch libraries, and three had been provided by the Carnegie Institute. There was no art gallery, but the usual practice existed - the Council was relying on donations for one. Joseph Innes Bates had bequeathed £20,000 for a gallery, and Alfred Herbert had promised a similar sum. But nothing could be built until he died. Coventry's citizens used their libraries with average frequency, but the city spent less than average on the service.

This policy of economy meant that Coventry's ratepayers benefited. In January 1925, Larkin, the City Treasurer said at a Rotary Club meeting that "Coventry, at the present moment, may be described as a ratepayers' paradise." (75) In that year, out of the 82 County Boroughs, it was 72nd as regards the payment of rates per head. This happy position changed gradually, but for only one year in the inter-war period, (1936/37) was Coventry in the top half of the County Borough "league table," and then it was 41st. In most years the payment of rates was below that in most other boroughs. The rates fixed by the Council actually fell for much of the 1920s, and fluctuated only slightly in the 1930s, but the increased payment per head came from the gradual rise in rateable values. New houses and new industrial property meant that not only did the amount of property with rateable value increase, but the valuation as well. Thus in 1922 the average amount of assessable value per head of the city's population was £4 7s, a low figure, which put Coventry in 70th place in the list of County Boroughs. By 1938 the figure was £7 4s, and Coventry was 34th in the list. Between April 1930 and April 1938 the total rateable value of the City rose by £530,000, an increase of 57 per cent. The total increase for all County Boroughs was 15 per cent for the same period. (76)

This meant that the amount brought in by a penny rate increased steadily, particularly in the 1930s. The city was comparatively well off, and could have afforded to pay more for its services. However, it should be pointed out that despite the increase and extension in the city, the proportion of the rateable value of the city covered by the industrial section dropped from 4.9 per cent to 4.0 per cent between 1930 and 1938. (77) Thus any rate increase fell overwhelmingly on householders, and for political reasons the ruling group sought to keep the rates down. The other comparisons with other county boroughs are of interest. In the mid 1930s

poor relief expenditure in Coventry was only about one third of the average for the County Boroughs as a whole, while expenditure on sewage and sewage disposal was nearly double the average for the County Boroughs. The first comparison reflected the relative prosperity of the city and played a significant part in keeping the rates down, while the second was probably one of the less attractive results of extending the city boundary, for the rural authorities had been unable to cope with the flood of people moving into their areas (between 1921 and 1931 the population of Foleshill Rural District increased by more than double - from 8,595 to 18,103). An editorial in the MDT in 1936 stated:

"Coventry's suburbs are in revolt. From North, south, east and west of the city complaints are pouring in concerning quagmire roads, non-existent footpaths and a score of other....pernicious nuisances." (78)

On the fixing of the level of expenditure the ruling group leant heavily on the officials of the Corporation, and in particular in the City Treasurer, Sydney Larkin. In general he seems to have encouraged those who were opposed to increased public expenditure on social services. In 1932, at a time when teachers, bus workers and school caretakers amongst others were having pay decreases imposed on them he wrote in his Annual Report:

"It cannot, of course, be claimed that public economy is a remedy for the whole of the troubles of the present day. It can only be said that it enables the poorer citizen better to meet their individual difficulties, while it encourages the distribution of money in healthy channels of trade to the benefit of the whole population." (79)

Only a few months after this new scheme for the salaries of the top officials, which gave them pay increases, was discussed in the City Council. When Labour members pointed out that other Council employees had taken pay cuts, the officials were defended by Payne who asked:

"How many people on the right (meaning the Socialists) have the ability to judge the ability of the City Treasurer? How many of them understand the consolidated funds?....How many of us here know the value of the heads of our department: We are only laymen. We don't understand finance to any extent." (80)

It was the view of the ruling groups as a whole that whereas they did not understand finance, they understood it more than Labour, and so no Labour members were allowed to sit on the Finance and General Purposes Sub-Committee. Labour was felt to be lacking in experience and balance when it came to money. As Payne pointed out, a pay increase was

"A matter of mental balance. Five pounds a week to me would be bankruptcy - to Stringer it would be living on the Riviera." (81)

The heads of departments exerted influence not only over Councillors and Aldermen, but over local government staff. Throughout the period there was a large branch of the National and Local Government Officers Association in existence, with negotiating rights, covering the salaried staff of the Council. By 1938 it had nearly 800 members, and although a Joint Committee existed for resolution of matters together with the Council and manual workers, it seldom met, for Nalgo preferred to deal directly with the Council. The General Committee of the branch ran the association, and branch meetings were called infrequently. It was accepted practice to elect a head of department to the position of Branch President, and other members of the branch were usually senior officials. This may account for the very wide differentials in salaries that existed. Under the new salary scheme of 1924, heads of department received a minimum of £1,000 per annum with annual increments of £59 to a maximum of £1,500. But junior entrants at the age of 16 started on only £39 per annum, less than the annual increment of the top grades. (82)

The service also discriminated against women. Long salary scales

meant that a male could start work at 16 and receive increments up to the age of 31. Women reached their maximum at the age of 24. After that they were expected to marry and leave.

Although differentials between senior officers and staff narrowed slightly during the inter-war years, the union remained firmly controlled by a small group of senior officers who endeavoured to ensure that relations with the Council were good. As a result, the union kept well away from the organised labour movement in Coventry, and devoted as much energy to social activities as to union matters. In this respect it was similar to the city's National Union of Teachers branch.

IV The Progressive Party

Given the tradition of municipal stagnation that had gone on throughout the century, the Coalition was faced with a tremendous task when it tried to stem the tide of Labour advance in the mid 1930s. The Coalition election machine was quite inferior to that of Labour's, it had a sorry record to defend, and Labour could attack all along the line of social and environmental services. Nevertheless, an effort was made to change the Coalition's image and revitalise the anti-Labour activists. Shortly after the Coalition had lost more seats in the 1936 Council elections, the Midland Daily Telegraph announced the formation of the Progressive Party.

The paper reported that the Coalition

"Felt that the time had come to replace the ill-defined and loosely-knit relationship in which the anti-Labour supporters stood, with a body that represented more accurately their approach to the electorate and which would remove any suggestion of political interest." (83)

This final relinquishment of Liberal and Conservative labels was an attempt

to unite all possible shades of opposition to Labour without being linked to "political activities of a national character." It was hoped that a more dynamic organisation could be created, that the CDEEA could be more closely linked to the anti-Labour group without falling into conventional party politics. The importance attached by the new Party to wooing the Association can be seen by the fact that the Treasurer of the new Party was G.E. Roberts, a member of the CDEEA Executive. This role also gives a clue as to the sort of support the Progressive Party hoped to get from the employers. However, old habits died hard, and the Chairman of the new Party was one of the leading Conservatives on the City Council, and the Vice-Chairman was a leading Liberal Alderman.

It is clear that the formation of the Progressive Party did bring the Coalition much closer to industrial leaders than they had ever been before, but the irony was that it came too late. Defeat achieved a unity that could not be built during the palmy days when Labour's challenge was small. In 1937 the CDEEA was too concerned with the rising tide of industrial unrest to devote much time to the new Party, but it would appear that sums of money were paid to it. Certainly the Party had a full time secretary, and an election agent was established well before the date of the municipal elections. Its slogan "Elect a Business Government for a Business City" suggests that it was trying to be more publicly identified with industry than it had been in the past.⁽⁸⁴⁾ Unfortunately for the Progressive Party, Labour only needed to hold their seats to win control of the Council, and this happened in November 1937.

The Progressives were able to put up candidates in every ward, something they had not done since 1931, and they achieved their highest ever total vote. But Labour did also, and a resigned but bitter Midland Daily Telegraph

commented

"This result was in accordance with general expectations, following on the large influx of labour from Socialist areas during the past year." (85)

However, a later edition went on to attack the failures of the new anti-socialist Party. It had, it claimed

"A dearth of that type of candidate for municipal honours which is truly representative of the commercial and industrial life of the city. It has not been necessary to penetrate far 'behind the scenes' to become aware of the almost frenzied search for candidates that has taken place during the months of September and October.....
.....The work of the City Council has been carefully shunned by many of our outstanding business men." (86)

The CDEEA had been able to provide material support but not a political organisation nor the sort of industrial leaders that could win seats. It had been obvious for several years that the Coalition was in disarray and that there was a basic lack of will to mount an energetic resistance to Labour. The Progressive Party had been too late and too like its predecessor to make a difference.

Evidence of the fact that there had been a closer link between the Progressive Party and the engineering employers from the minutes of a most unusual meeting of the Executive of the CDEEA. Normally the Association was most careful in any reference to political affairs, but here there was considerable openness. The meeting was first addressed by G.E. Roberts, who admitted that a number of voters in the recent elections had not known who the Progressive Party was, and he wished to initiate a discussion as to whether a new name was needed. The minutes record that

"Mr. Roberts stated that he was bringing the matter before this Committee as the Party appreciated very much the contributions which had been given by the Manufacturers to assist the Fighting Fund and it was felt that they ought to have some voice in the future policy of the party."

Roberts stated that he had received £50 from non-engineering manufacturers, but did not say how much had been received from the engineering companies. Later in the discussion, Varley stated that he could use a trust fund to donate £50 a year to the Party, but this again was over and above donations from the companies themselves. It was stated by Roberts that about £400 would be needed to maintain an office and secretary each year, and that candidates would be expected to meet their own expenses (this might explain why it was always difficult to find candidates). The rest of the meeting was taken up with a discussion as to what should be the name of the party; the Anti-Socialist Party and the National Party were names that were put forward, but finally a resolution was passed unanimously

"That in the opinion of the subscribing Manufacturers, it is desirable to continue, under the title of Pro-gressive Party, opposition to the Socialist Party in power in the City Council." (87)

Minutes of the meeting were headed "Strictly Private and Confidential" and it is easy to see why: the meeting represented a major breach in the claim of the CDEEA to steer clear of party politics. Not only did they discuss all aspects of the work of the anti-socialist alliance, but they made recommendations to it and were its major source of funds. Nevertheless, a few months later, the CDEEA showed that its general policy had not changed for it refused to comply with a request from the Conservative Party, saying that it did not interfere in party politics. This embargo clearly did not cover the Progressive Party. The support that was forthcoming from 1937 onwards should not obscure the fact, however, that for most of the period there was a major gulf between the commercial group running the city and the industrial group who ran its economic life. While the commercial group showed absolute loyalty to the industrial leaders, for the most part the support they received was sympathy rather than something more tangible. Many of the big concerns

were just too big to bother with municipal politics, and all of the companies were aware of the dangers which too close a link with the ruling group on the council would have on relations with their trade unions.

Both the Coventry Standard, the weekly paper, and the Midland Daily Telegraph portrayed the Coalition and its successor in the most favourable light possible, and sought to criticise Labour's programme. Like the CDEEA, the papers made a distinction between local and national political stances. Although it would give prominence to the sayings and doings of the Coalition spokesmen, the Telegraph never actually called on its readers to reject Labour and vote for the anti-socialist group, though that was the obvious inference of much of what was written. In the General Election, however, it was not afraid to tell its readers to vote Conservative. It became more openly Conservative in general elections after the Liberals stopped standing a candidate, and after the formation of a National Government. On the eve of the poll in 1935 and on the day of the election itself, the Telegraph appeared looking like a Conservative propaganda sheet. It contained prominent Conservative advertisements, a picture of Strickland the Conservative candidate, long quotations from his speeches, messages of endorsement from prominent local industrialists, all over the front page, and with a headline "Maintenance of National Government Policy Essential to City's Welfare." There was no reference at all to Labour or the Labour candidate on the front page, and inside, the space devoted to Noel-Baker's speeches as Labour candidate was about a third of that given to Strickland. There was also a prominent report of a speech by Lord Iliffe, the owner of the paper endorsing Strickland.⁽⁸⁸⁾ The day after the election the editorial declared "This is a great day for England."⁽⁸⁹⁾ Presumably Iliffe took more direction of the newspaper's line when general elections occurred, for until 1929 he

was a Conservative M.P. and from 1933 he sat in the Lords as a Conservative Peer. At other times, the existence of a mass of Labour supporters who also read the paper may have been a constraint.

Relations between the press and the engineering employers appear to have been cordial. There was little direct contact between the CDEEA and the press, at least on a formal level, though obviously the Association kept the newspapers well informed about its policies. One indiscreet minute of the CDEEA, however, reveals a picture of great influence. The AEU had published a statement complaining of low rates of pay in the city, and had sent a copy to the Coventry Standard. Before publishing this, the editor had contacted Varley, who later reported

"The Secretary stated that he had been successful in persuading the Editor of the Coventry Standard, firstly, to delete the article dealing with the Union's statements and secondly to consult him in future before publishing any material dealing with labour conditions in the Engineering industry in Coventry." (90)

It is unlikely that the Telegraph would have suppressed union statements, but it certainly had a procedure of allowing employers' spokesmen to comment on union claims, and the paper proudly gave much space to the achievements of Coventry companies and industrialists.

The well established civic leadership had got into the habit of ruling the city, and as time went by, got into the habit of ruling badly. The fact that a small social group could dominate political affairs for so long was a testament to the way power and influence had been concentrated. The advent of power of the Coalition predated by a long time the arrival of big industry to Coventry. While accepting that there was common interest between employers and civic leaders the Coalition tried to run the city as far as possible as if big industry did not exist. Employers' needs were seen to, but the Coalition was reluctant to face up to the social and environmental

consequences of the growth of large-scale engineering. The commercial group could appreciate the importance of industrial development, but could not come to grips with it. It did not have the ability or the will-power to reconstruct Coventry as a modern engineering city. This was to be the task of the Labour Party. What the Coalition had done was to divert municipal politics into a narrow range of financial preoccupations, and so ensure that a new administration would be needed to deal with immediate and pressing reforms. This diversion of municipal politics made it very difficult for the new Labour administration to use municipal power as a spring-board for socialist advance across the city. A policy of holding back the growth of municipal authority meant that the Labour Party found that political control was less important than had been realised.

FOOTNOTES

Civic Leaders

1. Information about occupations taken from Spennell's Directory of Coventry, 1919/20, 1920/21, P.J. Directory 1924, Directory of Coventry 1926/7 Coventry papers.
2. cf. Searbey, op.cit.
3. Coventry Chamber of Commerce, Annual Reports.
4. Vincent Wyles was an Officer in the Master Butcher's Association, and on the City Council from 1908 to 1937 without a break, first as Councillor then as an Alderman. He was Mayor in 1932. Fred Lee was the secretary of the Licensed Victuallers' Association for over 50 years. He was the owner of Fred Lee & Son, watch and jewel manufacturers. He was on the City Council from 1907 to 1937, first as a Councillor, then as an Alderman. He was Chairman of the Education Committee for many years. Thomas James Prentice was the secretary of the Builders' Association. He became the secretary of the new Progressive Party in 1937, and was on the City Council from 1935.
5. See the Chapter on Housing, Chapter eight.
6. Richardson, op.cit. p.32.
7. P. Searbey, op.cit.
8. Coventry Permanent Economic Building Society, Annual Report, 1915.
9. " " " " " " " " 1915-1939.
10. ibid.
11. Reference mislaid.
12. Coventry Standard, November 1911.
13. Bannington polled 440 votes, the other two totalled 471.
14. Coventry Liberal Association, Minutes, 20th April 1915.
15. Liberal Association Municipal Committee, Minutes, 22nd September and 3rd October 1919. Also 9th October 1919.
16. Liberal Association Municipal Committee, Minutes, 4th April 1923, and 1st October 1923.
17. Liberal Association Municipal Committee, Minutes, 26th May 1924.

18. MDT 2nd November 1923.
19. Liberal Association Municipal Committee, Minutes, 23rd July 1924.
20. " " " " " 3rd September 1924.
21. ibid.
22. Liberal Association Municipal Committee, Minutes, 28th July 1924, and 29th September 1924.
23. Coventry Liberal Association, Minutes, 5th June 1923.
24. " " " " 9th December 1924.
25. " " " " 9th March 1927.
26. " " " " 18th October 1926.
27. " " " " 4th May 1927.
28. " " " " 26th September 1927.
29. " " " " 21st May 1928.
30. " " " " 11th May 1925.
31. CDEEA, Executive Committee, Minutes, 1st October 1923.
32. " " " " 26th January 1931, and 6th July 1931.
33. " " " " 21st September 1931.
34. " " " " 21st August 1922.
35. " " " " 7th October 1929.
36. " " " " 31st March 1930.
37. " " " " 21st July 1930.
38. " " " " 22nd October 1934.
39. " " " " 1st July 1935.
40. MDT 31st December 1935.
41. CDEEA Executive Committee, Minutes, 17th February 1936.
42. CDEEA Executive Committee, Minutes, 16th December 1935.
43. ibid.
44. MDT 29th October 1937.

45. MDT 6th November 1936.
46. " 30th October 1936.
47. PRO ED 21 41927 Letter from Stacy to F.Horner, Education Committee Secretary, 12th July 1919.
48. PRO ED 21 41927 December 1919.
49. " " " Letter from F.Horner to Board of Education 23rd July 1919.
50. J.W. Docking, The Development of Church of England Schools in Coventry, 1811-1944 (unpb. M.A. thesis Leeds 1966, p.272).
51. PRO ED 60 242/557. H.M.Inspector's minute about circular 1352 March 1924.
52. Coventry Standard, 3/4th February 1933.
53. PRO ED 35 6331 Letter from Harrod, 15th February 1924, quoting from an Inspector's Report of November 1922.
54. PRO ED 53 337 Undated report from H.M.Inspector T.A. Stephens.
55. Coventry Higher Education Sub-Committee Minutes, December 1919.
56. Higher Education Sub-Committee Minutes, June 1937.
57. G.C. Firth, Coventry, An Educational Survey, 1902-1938, unpub. p.34.
58. Board of Education, Secondary Schools on the Grant List 1936-37, List 62, 1938.
59. ibid.
60. PRO ED 63/67 Aid to Pupils 1935. For the significance of circular 1421 see B. Simon, The Politics of Educational Reform, 1920-1940, (1974) pp.335-358.
61. Harrod, "Special Places and Intermediate Awards - Scale of Income Limits," a paper reported in the Minutes of the Higher Education Sub-Committee, February 1935.
62. PRO ED 97/609 Memorandum 30th November 1928.
63. Education Committee, Annual Report, 1927.
64. PRO ED 21 41910 H.M. Inspector's Report, July 1921.
65. Education Committee, Annual Report, 1927.
66. Board of Education, Report by H.M.Inspectors on Day Classes for Engineering Apprentices, HMSO 1928.
67. Board of Education, Report of the Committee on Education for the Engineering Industry, HMSO 1931 27/225.

68. PRO ED 21 41914 Memorandum October 1931.
69. PRO ED 21 St. Osburgs School file, Memorandum December 1935. "P.E.S." stood for Primary, Elementary, Secondary.
70. Coventry Standard, 2/3rd June 1933.
71. MDT 28th September 1937.
72. J.B. Priestley, English Journey, (1934) p.69/70.
73. MDT 30th January 1936
74. PRO HLG 51 248 Purchase of County Hall 1936, 21st May 1936.
75. Coventry Herald, 3rd January 1925.
76. Ministry of Health, Statement Showing the Amount of the Local Rates per Pound of Assessable Value, later called Rates and Rateable Values, England and Wales, HMSO 1921-1939. (However, these figures need to be treated with some reserve, as local valuations could vary considerably)
77. ibid.
78. MDT 29th September 1936. The Rate figures are in Ministry of Health, Local Government Financial Statistics, England and Wales, 1934/35, HMSO. Poor Relief in Part I, Sewage in Part II.
79. MDT October 1932.
80. Coventry Standard, 17th March 1933.
81. Coventry Nalgo, General Committee Minutes, 8th October 1924.
82. MDT 29th December 1936.
83. " 28th July 1937.
84. " 2nd November 1937.
85. " 24th November 1937.
86. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 17th January 1938.
87. MDT 13th November 1937.
88. " 15th November 1937.
89. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 26th October 1936.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Labour Challenge

The Labour Party saw itself as the party of socialism, and was battling for a socialist Coventry. It represented the outsiders, the working class that had been denied access to power and influence by the Coalition. The Labour Party seeking power, therefore, was more than an attempt to change leadership, it was an attempt to upset the balance of class forces, and to dispossess the ruling group. Hodgkinson recalled the emotional impact when Labour finally got a majority in November 1937.

"To us the clouds had lifted, the people had responded to the appeal 'England arise, the long, long night is over.' Our dreams had become a reality, we had escaped from history and saw the dawn of a new day." (1)

Labour identified both employers and Coalition as part of the ruling class. But it had difficulty in elaborating a strategy that would attack both sections. It overestimated the strength of the links between these two sections, and assumed that once in power it could dominate both. In practice, it concentrated its aim on the Coalition. Its gradual success at a time of stagnation in the unions strengthened it in its belief that it was the leadership of the Labour movement. This in turn encouraged the view that winning political power was the way to deal with the ruling class.

Coventry Labour Party had few intellectuals in it; it contained practical men and women who had socialist ideals but lacked a programme of socialist action, and who developed a habit of looking to their social betters for leadership on national issues. (Witness the selection of Noel-Baker, Crossman, Edelman as parliamentary candidates). Its gradual movement away from the trade unions encouraged it to concentrate on the

need to create a modern infrastructure for an expanding industrial city.

In Hodgkinson's words, it was "A Party which claimed 'we will get things
(2)
done'."

It was not a party that had analysed how power was divided between the two ruling sections, nor had it a strategy for putting power into the hands of working people.

This chapter considers the slow and gradual rise to power of the Labour Party, and its actions once in office. It does not give a full assessment of Labour in control, for its plans had barely been thought out before war intervened. It also deals with the powerful Co-operative movement in Coventry, and considers its contribution to the formation of a working class consciousness.

The Labour Party

Despite the split in its ranks between pacifists and war supporters, the Labour Party emerged from the war stronger than before, as its showing in the December 1918 election proved. Although a long way behind the Conservative, this was a creditable performance for a first attempt. It was followed up by a strong challenge in the local elections. However, the Labour Party had to discover in the early 1920s that enthusiasm was not enough. Attention has already been drawn to the slowness with which the Party established an effective organisation with a full time organiser and individual membership. There was also some confusion when it came to standing candidates in November 1919. A lot of work had been done to get the Co-op to put up candidates, but, in the election Alice Arnold stood as an Independent in Swanswell and beat the Co-op candidate into second place. Alice Arnold presumably had not been chosen as a fit Labour candidate, but

after she was elected she became a Labour Councillor. Arnold was the only Councillor who was a socialist, and she did not appear to work well with Wale and Moseley; the Coalition singled her out for attack whilst commenting favourably on the other two Labour Councillors.⁽³⁾

Excluding Alice Arnold, Labour won five seats on the City Council in 1919. The next year the Labour vote was erratic, reduced in some wards, but increased in others, but the opposition was much more united and Labour won only three seats. In 1921 Labour could only put six candidates forward, though two Communists stood as unofficial Labour candidates, and, although the vote held up in the wards contested, no seats at all were won. Labour did not even contest Stoke, which had been won in 1919 and 1920. In 1922 Labour was defending the six (including Alice Arnold's seat) that had been won in 1919. Eleven candidates in all were put up, and the total Labour vote was greater than it had been in 1919. But the Coalition vote had recovered, and the two ruling parties totalled 8,000 more votes than Labour, who retained only one seat, that of Alice Arnold. In the next few years the total vote declined, with Labour winning two seats in 1923, none in 1924 and one in 1925. Not until after the boundary changes in 1928 and a municipal election which saw every one of the 45 seats on the Council contested at the same time, did the Party's fortunes pick up. In that year it won 11 of the 45 seats, even though the Coalition picked up most of the seats in the new areas.

The best result was in 1929 when for the first time since 1919 Labour won more than half of the seats - 9 out of 15. In 1930 and 1931 results were disappointing, but from 1933 Labour began to achieve the sort of results that led to the takeover of the Council in 1937. The period from 1920 to 1933, with the exception of 1928 and 1929, were years of defeat for Labour,

and saw the Party make no progress in getting local control, despite the large majority of working people in the city. This failure contrasted with the results in the general elections in Coventry. Although Labour only held the seat briefly, between 1922 and 1923, it was won again in 1929. Only in 1931 with the formation of the National Government did the Labour vote in the city recede. Lack of success in the local elections may have been linked to the defeats suffered by the trade unions in this period, and to the decline in trade union militancy. T.J. Harris claimed that the poor results were because the Party was so closely identified with the unions who were "making trouble" in that they sought to protect their members.⁽⁴⁾ The Midland Daily Telegraph thought that Labour had been branded with extremism:

"We know what extremist advocacy has been poured out in Coventry since the days when the City was over-run by Clyde deportees and others; we know how certain leaders of the revolutionary type have from time to time tried to exploit the unfortunate unemployed or to interfere in trade disputes....

....What Coventry, like other places, wants is a clean cut from extreme doctrines in respect of Labour candidates."⁽⁵⁾

The link with the unions, however, was most likely the key to the poor showing. The defeats suffered by unions in the early 1920s not only led to poor morale, but to a great many people leaving unions and the number of activists falling off. This must have affected support for Labour.

Although Party membership rose in the 1920s while trade union membership went down, the Labour Party on the Council appeared to be closer to the unions in the 1920s than it was in the 1930s. Of the nine Labour Councillors who served between 1919 and 1925 2 were trade union officials, 3 were railway workers, and 2 were engineering workers. Seven had close links with, or were, manual workers, while 4 had close links with engineering workers. Of the 31 Labour Councillors and Aldermen whose occupations can be identified in the period 1936-38 only 7 had close links with, or were manual

workers, and only 4 had close links with engineering workers. Up to 11 of the 31 were employees of the Co-op, 5 were classed as "housewives", 3 were retired and 2 were clergymen.⁽⁶⁾ These figures would appear to show a move away from closeness with manual workers and unions, and perhaps they do, but they need explaining. It soon became clear to the Labour Party activists that they would be very lucky if they could keep their jobs while representing Labour. Thus Hodgkinson was faced with a choice between political activity and an engineering job.⁽⁷⁾ Sidney Stringer was also an engineering worker, but had to take a job with the Co-op. Alice Arnold had to be found a Co-op job after she left the Workers Union. Bill Halliwell, who with Hodgkinson and Stringer could be called the leaders of the Party in the 1930s, ended up with the Co-op, while Wale not only worked for the Co-op for many years but eventually became its President. Thus the Co-op became a refuge for Labour activists; it was the only source of patronage to be set against the many businesses and charities to which the Coalition had access.

It would be unwise to attach too much significance to the decline in the number of manual workers who were standing for the City Council for the Labour Party in the 1930s, yet the facts are of some interest. They show that at last the Labour Party had developed the sort of group that would be necessary for the administering of the city should it come to power. The leadership was composed of pretty well full time Party activists, with few or no direct links with other Labour movement organisations such as the Trades Council or the unions. This allowed a more consistent attack on the ruling parties to be organised, and an alternative programme worked out. But it did mean that there was a division, not of sympathies, but of work and personnel between the industrial organisations of labour and the political.

It was more difficult for trade union delegates to play a leading role in the party, as it had acquired a hierarchy of its own. It is interesting to note that this hierarchy, and indeed the whole Labour structure, was on a narrow base. Although Labour Party membership had reached 1,000 in 1925, it failed to grow, and indeed fell off significantly in the late 1920s. In 1929 only 489 members were paid up for voting at Annual Conference.⁽⁸⁾ Membership fluctuated around the 500-600 mark for several years after, and went up in 1933. By 1937 it was back over the 1,000 mark but then fell to below 800 for the next two years. For all but two years in the 1930s Party membership was higher in Nuneaton than it was in Coventry, and after 1937 membership was higher in Rugby than in the city.⁽⁹⁾

It could be that an exclusive concentration on municipal politics led to the establishment of effective ward organisation as an alternative to reliance on union organisation and this influenced membership. No doubt the Party could look to the unions to provide helpers at elections, but there was no sign of the Party running big events or attracting publicity in the 1930s at times other than election periods. The habit of organising the big May Day rallies that once impressed the city collapsed with the decline of the Trades Council and the defeats of the 1920s and was never revived. In Coventry, the gaining of a majority on the City Council had become a real prospect after the 1930 election, but did not occur until 1937 and this protracted struggle for power may well have led to a concentration on the struggle in the Council Chamber and a neglect of the Party membership. Moreover, the weakness of the Coalition made it easy to organise election successes. With an established leadership in the Party that was effective in putting the Coalition on the Council on the defensive, there was no pressure on the leadership to expand. No doubt Hodgkinson, as the

only full-time worker for the Party, switched the emphasis of his work after he was elected as Councillor in 1928.

By the mid 1930s the Labour Party in the city had become a professional body capable of, and expecting to, take power. It was no longer dependent on the unions, at least for personnel, and it survived the breakaway of the ILP, as the prominent ILP members on the Council refused to leave the Party. But it was a small number of leaders backed up by a relatively small group of members that relied on and expected only passive support from the mass of its supporters. It did not involve workers in the way that trade unions did, and while it played an important part as the political expression for many working people, it remained separate and detached from the experience of struggle in the workplaces.

It should be made clear that there were no real political differences between the Labour Party and the unions, and that nearly all the unions were affiliated to it. But failure to provide a leadership that presented a social and economic face as well as a political one made the task of breaking down the control of the ruling groups more difficult.

One side of the Labour Party that did combine social work with political activity was the Women's Section. The Party had a Central Committee for women and ward groups. Some of its activity involved raising money and organising socials and dances, while some was helping in the general work of the Party. The women claimed that they played a large part in helping Labour to victory.

II Labour Politics

During this period Coventry changed from being a provincial town to

being an engineering city. The city extended its boundaries taking in new suburbs. The growth of population put pressure on the municipal administration to provide the services and amenities considered necessary. Members of the Coalition, coming from a commercial background, had no incentive to intervene in municipal life to improve these services. Consequently their record of administration was open to attack, and Labour concentrated on the many abuses and the failure of the Coalition to keep up with national legislation.

Throughout the period the battles between the Labour group and the Coalition/Progressives, and the issues over which the elections were fought were the obvious ones of housing, education, the level of rates, the environment and the need to attract and keep industry in the city. Many of the bitter differences between the two groups were fairly technical, based on reports of sub-committees that seldom attracted attention. But differences were not confined to policies. Labour brought emotion and sometimes fury into the Council Chamber, and provoked scenes at many Council meetings. The suspicion that Council members or friends were making money out of contracts caused rows on a number of occasions in this period, particularly in housing, and the treatment of Council employees and contract workers was seen by Labour as an emotional subject. Thus they attacked the high wages of some senior employees, and criticised the low wages of many others, and fought for many years for a minimum wage. The application of national policies such as means tests led to some angry outbursts, as did Coalition attempts to cut the rates at the expense of social services.

Although Labour sought for an expansion of expenditure on social services, its financial policy was extremely cautious. Indeed, T.J.Harris, who was its financial spokesman, had a positive horror of borrowing, and

this communicated itself to others, particularly Hodgkinson. Harris felt that money for expenditure should be raised before the expenditure went ahead, and devoted much time to considering how the municipal debt, which was quite modest, could be abolished. On one occasion he argued

"That a debt-free city can be achieved without initial sacrifice is not possible. But I do submit that a debt-free City would so gain in administrative freedom, in social well-being, in trading power, and prestige in the councils of the nation, as to make any sacrifice light in comparison." (10)

At the opening ceremony of the Hen Lane Housing Estate in 1932, at a time when he was Chairman of the Housing Committee, he said

"It was a matter of concern to him that the houses were put up on borrowed money, because it threw the burden on the rates....every estate built became a barrier to further development." (11)

This approach could have been a serious limitation on local spending, but appears to have been channeled along more orthodox lines into attacks on the Coalition for giving such a high proportion of the rates to money-lenders, and suggestions for municipal enterprises. An election leaflet in 1925 headlined the debt burden of the city, and only a secondary item referred to the rise in infant mortality.⁽¹²⁾ By the 1930s, however, a more sustained and coherent attack was elaborated against Coalition rule. The Party's manifesto of 1936 rounded on the claim that Labour would force up the rates, and that the Coalition was the party of sound economic management. It pointed out that interest charges had reached the figure of 1/5d in the pound, and blamed Coalition politics:

"They say they are out for a 'stabilised rate', to secure which they cut necessary services, and borrow again.... The whole trend of Coalition policy is against falling rates, or even stabilisation at the present figure.

They part with land cheaply which should be retained. They have entered into commitments that must force up expenditure, and then borrow, the full weight of which is reserved for tomorrow. They do not plan, they wait upon events." (13)

This last criticism was about the strongest that the Labour Party could make, for it was aware of the fact that Coventry was still physically incapable of meeting the demands put upon it by ^{both} industry and an expanding population. The centre of the city was medieval in layout, though most of the buildings lacked any appropriate charm. The only major attempt to reorganise the city centre had been the building of Corporation Street and this had been held up by shopkeepers, and attacked by Labour Councillors for some of the contracts that were awarded.

On a more positive note, the same manifesto claimed

"There are means of saving, open to the Labour Party that is (sic) a closed book to the Coalition.

New estates are being opened up all round the City at the moment. The profit goes to private individuals, the expenses to the ratepayers.

Bulk buying, a municipal printing department, a municipal bank, a levelling-up of the assessment of licensed houses - these, to quote a few of the many methods, would save the city thousands of pounds annually." (14)

Labour reacted against the traditional Coalition position that local government should be as restricted as possible and that private enterprise should be the only type of business in the city by imagining Coventry as a large multi-faceted co-operative. The Party opposed the selling off of land in the city centre, though it did not always support the use the Coalition put to the land it acquired. Elaborate plans for a new city centre were considered even before Labour came to power.

Hodgkinson

"urged that members of the Council should look forward to the day when central property would be required by the Corporation for laying out the centre of the city on the lines followed by Continental cities." (15)

The Party was thus ready to see the opportunities created by the devastation of the Second World War, but in the 1930s all this was too much for a

Coalition that objected to spending money on paving footpaths unless this was felt to be essential.

The Party was by no means satisfied that existing municipal institutions were properly run, and the party line was well expressed by Harris in 1933, discussing the annual report of the Electricity Department

"He was rather proud of the establishment, because it showed how very efficient a municipally-owned concern could be, yet when they wanted to judge its working results it was only fair they should take in comparison other concerns. What he felt about not only that department but all their departments was that instead of the common people for whom the Council were the trustees getting the real advantages of the concerns they were passed over to a very small and select class. Mr. Harris discussed the balance sheet of a private company, and stressed what a board of directors could do for a comparatively small number of people that Council ought to be doing for the whole of the citizens, and the reason it was not doing so was that small and select groups of people, while not having the advantage of investment in the concern, managed to milk it, so they got the advantage of an industry developed in the city." (16)

A Labour administration would charge the industrial concerns the full rate, he promised. Other points in Labour's programme of municipal reform were the full implementation of statutes dealing with housing, welfare, slum clearance, and health, better and more available education, better houses, and more of them, and cheap transport as a public service. (17)

Labour's policies in the years prior to winning power were attacked by the editorials in the Midland Daily Telegraph, surprisingly, for not being radical enough. Of the 1936 manifesto the paper commented,

"It is one of the most moderate - even modest - documents of its kind ever placed before the electors by the Socialist organisers." (18)

It went on to claim that it was a long way removed from the extravagant policies argued by the Party in earlier years, but there is little to support this claim. Throughout the period the goals were the same, better

housing, social services, public transport, municipal enterprises, education. A year later the Midland Daily Telegraph returned to the same theme. Although the Labour policy was unchanged it was then described as "terribly unsocialistic - and how extremely unoriginal." The paper ingeniously felt that

"The Socialist Party finds itself in that inevitable difficulty created by the fact that Coventry, which owns the whole of the public services, is already as highly socialised a community as any sane local legislator could hope to make it." (19)

Although this argument was rejected by the Labour Party, it echoed some of its statements, as it sought to persuade the electors that Socialism was not an alien creed. In 1937 the Party began to produce a four page newspaper printed in London, containing mostly nationally produced material, but with some local items as well. It was distributed free about four times a year. The election issue in 1937 pointed out to its readers:

"The safeguards of municipal health and sanitation, the facilities of municipal recreation, the opportunities of municipal education - all these are so much a part of our lives that we rarely stop to think: 'Why, this is pure socialism!'.

....Municipal Socialism is, in fact, characteristically and typically British." (20)

"Pure Socialism" or not, the Labour approach was essentially one of quantity rather than of quality. Socialism meant more social services and municipalisation. But the role of a local authority in relation to the mode of production and political institutions was not considered. A small example was the claim of the Party that it had been instrumental in getting the Technical College for the city. This directly contradicted the Coalition claim, as it was the ruling group at the time the decision was taken. Labour pointed out, however, that at the decisive Council meeting in 1933, the Coalition group had been split, and that 17 had voted

for a further postponement of the scheme, while 15 had voted for an immediate start. All of the Labour members had voted for the College, and so it had been accepted. But there is no record of Labour spokesmen seeing the Technical College as part of a system of education designed to rigidify the social system and serve the interests of the large industrial formations. While criticising the Coalition for being lukewarm to the College, another issue of the Labour Party paper attacked the shortage of secondary school places in the city, claiming "It is as hard for a boy to get into a secondary school as it is for a rich man to get into the Kingdom of Heaven." There was no comment that the creation of the College was designed to continue this state of affairs.⁽²¹⁾

The two main influences on the Labour Party were non-conformism and the ILP. Besides having two clergymen on the Council in the 1930s, the Rev Richard Lee and the Rev A.R. Bromage, men like Moseley, John Fennell, Harris and Briggs were lay preachers. Lee was also a member of the ILP as were Hodgkinson, Stringer, Ellen Hughes and a number of others. Indeed, for all of the period the local Party relied on the ILP to provide the intellectual leadership. But the ILP itself did not have much of an independent life, and its weaknesses were clearly seen when it decided in 1932 to disaffiliate from the Labour Party. In Coventry, all the Leaders of the Labour Party who were in the ILP, except Richard Lee, refused to leave the Party, and left the ILP instead.⁽²²⁾ Lee himself soon returned to the fold. The ILP contested a number of seats in the municipal elections in the years 1932 to 1936, but only secured more than a handful of votes when they fought in wards not contested by the Labour Party. Their intervention in Cheylesmore prevented Labour from winning the seat in 1933, and according to Hodgkinson the intellectual level of the Labour Party declined, but the

overall effect was minor.

A smaller group in the Labour Party came from either the Communist Party or the Minority Movement. Bert Cresswell, who became the first Lord Mayor of the city, and Robert Thompson, who became Chairman of the Labour Party for a time in the late 1920s, had both been active Communists, and Halliwell and W.I. Thompson had been in the Minority Movement. But Marxist ideas did not have a big hold on the local party, nor did the Left Book Club. According to Hodgkinson, who was its secretary, it only had 20 subscribers in the city.⁽²³⁾ The Party was not then strong on theory, but prided itself in the practical values of craft engineering that men like Stringer and Hodgkinson had acquired. Their remit was to win power on the City Council, and use that power to reshape and extend the social services. This meant that the Party would change the political rules, but not challenge the political system.

III The Co-operative Movement

The Labour councillors were aware that they were excluded from charities and institutions such as boards of governors, but in the co-operative movement they had a charity of their own. As already mentioned, a large number of Labour councillors ended up as employees of the Co-op. Not only was it prepared to employ them in the first place, but it was accommodating in allowing them time off to do their duties. The Co-operative movement is the most neglected wing of the labour movement, and though there are many good reasons for its neglect, it had a unique and peculiar relationship with trade unions and the Labour Party.

Throughout the 1920s there were bitter controversies in the Coventry

Co-operative movement about its role in political affairs. The war had seen the imposition of Excess Profits Tax and a restriction in the supply of food to the Society, and this had convinced many leading members that its place lay firmly within the ranks of the Labour movement. At the same time the Society was growing, and needed to be put on a more businesslike footing, and some of the ideals that had survived from the nineteenth century were being questioned. The Society was no longer a self-help club but a business with shops, coal depots, bakeries, a dairy, a warehouse, and committees and assembly rooms. In 1920, as a symbol of the change, the word "perseverance" was dropped from its title.

A number of different positions were taken up within the Society in the early 1920s and fought out over the next half dozen years. One position was put forward by the Rev W.H. Oliver, the Society's education secretary, editor of its monthly journal The Wheatsheaf until he left the city in 1934, and author of a short history of the Society.⁽²⁴⁾ Oliver was upset by the decline in the ideals of the Society, and wished for a return to the values of the first religiously inclined pioneers. In 1926 he wrote

"Today, self-help, which formed a place in the designation or title of many of the older co-operative societies, like other such words as 'Equitable,' 'Provident,' or 'Perseverance' is assigned to the dustbin, simply because of our coming too respectable in putting co-operation into practice."
(25)

He hoped to see a time when the society's shops

"Will exist for something more than the purchase of commodities - they will be the rendezvous for social, physical, mental as well as economic pursuits." (26)

He encouraged discussion about the aims of co-operation in the journal, and also wrote about his own dislikes - smoking, drinking, greyhound racing and credit. He was particularly upset at the decision of the society in 1927 to set up mutuality clubs, which allowed members to purchase goods on

credit. In a debate on the subject at a conference in Rugby he said that this practice was "undermining the moral fibre of its members" and a reversal to "the despised tallyman" system.⁽²⁷⁾ He received no support. He was responsible for the survival of educational classes, many of them vocational for co-op employees, but he showed no interest in trade unions and the Labour Party and consequently was listened to but not regarded as very influential. His views that the co-operative movement was quite different from other retailers was generally accepted by the movement, and he was able to write in his history that after the war

"It became the Society's policy to apply the truth that capitalism is the very negation of all that life stands for." (28)

He was not prepared to go beyond this into practice and advocate that the society should join the Labour Party, as he felt it would become an adjunct to that body.

A second position was put forward by those who objected to the growing tendency of the society to support the Labour Party. This group saw the co-operative movement as a peculiar sort of trading body that should have no political strings attached. Perhaps the leading exponent of this position, until he died in 1927, was George Jarrams. He was secretary of the society for nearly 40 years. Only a few months before he died, he attacked the Management Committee for giving relief to striking miners in 1926. He said that the affiliation with Labour had caused the co-op's own employees to strike at that time, and that it was an outrage that credit had been given to miners families. The Management Committee, he wrote, has a duty to "supply coal to their members, and not support strikers, and as a result throw a lot of members out of work."⁽²⁹⁾ He was supported by a number of other active co-operators, in particular Mrs. Varney, who complained to The Wheatsheaf:

"By allowing ourselves to become submerged by politics we are throwing away the substance for the shadow. The co-operative society is a trading body pure and simple, in which the forces operative in the trade unions can have no place." (30)

Another allegation which received some support was that affiliation to the Co-operative Party and the Labour Party, and the granting of relief to the miners had cost the society a lot of money. Although this group claimed they wanted the co-op to be politically involved, it is possible that some of them were linked to other political parties. One of the candidates in the elections for the Management Committee was Mrs. Ivens, wife of a Liberal Councillor, and proposed by a Conservative Councillor. Earlier Councillor William Jones had been President of the Society for 29 years, and when he was replaced in 1918 it was by another Liberal, James Clay, who refused to accept that the movement was a working class one. He wrote,

"Our real social enemies are within the gates, not outside. There are influences at work within the movement which are endeavouring to close the 'open door' of co-operation, and confine its energies and benefits to the section of society sometimes defined as the 'working class.' " (31)

In 1927 a Mrs. Jackson who had been elected to the Education Committee was asked to speak on her election address to the Women's Co-op Guild, where it was reported she had a rough time, for she advocated that money should not be spent on political issues. Clearly the elections had been hotly contested, for the report said

"Several leaflets were quoted which, in the opinion of members, as expressed during discussion, were merely printed 'dope' for the uninitiated. Many questions were asked and warmly discussed. Owing to the inability to answer several questions through not being sufficiently conversant with the principles of our movement, Mrs. Jackson said she was not a walking encyclopaedia, and would prefer to answer them another time." (32)

If this was part of an attempt to wrest control of the Co-op from Labour

supporters, and it was seen as such at the time, it died out in a few years.

A completely different position was put forward by an influential group of Labour Party activists, with the co-operation of a number of Communists. They defended co-op policy to give credit to strikers and their families, and indeed criticised the Coventry society for not doing enough, and in particular not being prepared for the 1926 General Strike. Halliwell, Stringer, Harris and Hodgkinson all took an interest in the society, and stood for posts, but the most active on the left until he died in 1930 was probably W.E. Wood, Vice-Chairman of the Management Committee. He was a member of the ILP for some time, and although he left it because he found it too radical, he still saw the co-operative movement as an integral part of the working class movement as a whole and with a political role to play alongside the Labour Party and the trade unions. He agreed with Mrs. Corrie who was one of a bunch of future Labour women councillors active in the co-op in the 1920s, when she wrote that

"The movement came into existence because of the exploitation of the workers; that exploitation exists today in a much more subtle form." (33)

It is interesting to note that members of this group worked closely with Communists in the co-op and that the most successful Minority Movement group was its co-op group.

The final position was that of Harry Wale. He agreed with Oliver that the movement was an alternative to a capitalist system, and agreed with other members of the Labour Party that it should have political affiliations. But he felt that good business sense should come before political gestures, which should always be costed. He wrote in May 1925 that

"We have, I think, learned our lesson in the past quarter of a century's experience of onslaught by the private capitalist. And that lesson is that co-operative concerns must use every legitimate device of efficiency and sound finance which is used by our competitors. If we attempt

uneconomic experiments in trade and finance, whilst our competitors are straining every nerve to reduce cost and improve distribution we shall go down. We may have demonstrated some admirable communistic or Utopian principle, but we shall lose our public. And our splendid co-operative machine is not to be risked to test doubtful ideals and individual dreams. Let the idealist and dreamer work out his salvation and solve his problem by the methods open to him as a political unit of the State." (34)

This was a criticism of the left's desire to see that strikers got a lot of credit, but also of Oliver's ideals, and that person soon replied, sadly pointing out that

"The ideals of the pioneers have become dimmed by commercial success....So long as the dividend kept high and came regularly, no thought was given as to whether it was obtained quite fairly; whether justice had been done to employees, whether goods had been manufactured under the principle for production for profit or production for use. So the self-seeking capitalistic spirit has crept in." (35)

Wale, who was backed by many of the long-serving members of the management committee and the Society's management, was the object of some attacks, principally from the left, who felt that more decisions about the future of the Society should be taken at members' meetings. He replied attacking

"The outdated and confused idea that democracy means control of each item of executive action by the mass of members or people in general."

"Inasmuch as the co-operative movement has chosen to meet the capitalist system on its own ground, to compete with it from within, with a view to the elimination of that form of competition which ceaselessly threatens the hard-earned standards of comfort of the great majority, then co-operation cannot afford to sacrifice the smallest measure of energy, brain and initiative - so necessary for the struggle, to shibboleths of democracy, ill-defined or meaningless." (36)

Wale, as the voice of management and efficiency in the Co-op was extremely important. He had been influential in the Co-op while he was an employee, and became President of the Management Committee in 1924. For two years he was both President and employees, but in 1926 he retired. At a presentation ceremony he was described by Noel-Baker the Parliamentary candidate

as the "Napoleon of the Co-operative movement in Coventry," but he had better luck than Napoleon when it came to staying in power, for he remained President of the society until 1940.⁽³⁷⁾

Wale's position had the most success in the 1920s and practice did not change in the 1930s. The other more radical members of the Labour Party were able to get the Society to work closely with the Party, but not to use its full weight in political or industrial matters. Even achieving this proved to be difficult.

Prior to the war, the Co-op had kept out of involvement in politics, but it was not immune to the rash of radicalism that spread in the post war years. In 1919 the Society allowed two women members of the Management Board to stand as Co-op candidates in the Guardian's elections, the first time it had happened in its history. This was repeated later in the year, in the municipal elections, when two candidates were put up after agreement with the Labour Party. But this agreement did not extend to Alice Arnold, who won her seat against the Co-op candidate. This was the last time separate candidates stood, but the Co-operative Representation Committee which had been established in 1919 remained in existence for several years. The Society had affiliated to the Co-operative Party, and instructed its Representation Committee to draft a resolution on the affiliation of the Co-op Union to the Labour Party, which was approved by the Management Committee.⁽³⁸⁾ The Society also agreed to send a delegate to the local Council of Action in September 1920, which had been set up to agitate against British intervention in the Soviet Union, and this step was sufficiently radical to attract the attention of the Daily Mail, which made some hostile comments about the Society's relations with the Council, which contained trade unions, and socialist and communist supporters.⁽³⁹⁾ However,

the Society would not openly work with the Labour Party, nor allow its offices to be used by it.

After the war for the first time, the Society began to extend credit to strikers and their families. In the Railway strike in 1919, it was agreed to supply goods on credit if the need arose, but this was not taken up. It was the foundry workers at the end of the year who were the first beneficiaries of the Society's new attitude. Their strike began in September and lasted for four months. In October officials of the union, the Friendly Society of Iron Founders, sent a deputation to the Society and pointed out that they had six hundred members in the district on strike. It was agreed to allow groceries and provisions up to 10/- per week per family for an initial period of four weeks. This was eventually extended throughout the rest of the strike, and meant that in all the Society had given £3,600 worth of credit, at a fairly difficult trading period.⁽⁴⁰⁾ It was less easy, however, for the Society to recover the money lent out, and the Foundry Workers had to be given several extensions of credit. This was used as a weapon by those members who were opposed to special terms for trade unions, as was the £1,000 credit given to the Miners' Federation in the strike of 1921.⁽⁴¹⁾ The miners' union found this very difficult to pay off, and offered to mortgage the Bedworth office to pay off the debt. By the time of the General Strike only a small portion of the debt had been repaid.

This political and industrial involvement produced a backlash, probably based on the costs to the Society, and in July 1921 a motion was debated and passed at a members' meeting which committed the Society to avoid all political action and to disaffiliate from the Co-Operative Party.⁽⁴²⁾ No political activity took place until 1925, when an attempt was made to

again affiliate the Society to the Co-operative Party. A members meeting voted down this proposal once more, but in 1926 a different approach was made. George Hodgkinson gave notice that he would move a motion at the next members meeting,

"That this quarterly meeting of the Coventry and District Society Ltd. agrees that £25 be put aside for political purposes and instructs its Management Committee to seek affiliation to the Coventry Labour Party."

This was keenly contested, and at the meeting only carried by a vote of 286 to 279.⁽⁴³⁾ Even before the issue had been discussed, the Management Committee had taken legal opinion, and showed some reluctance to accept the resolution when carried.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Later the Society was advised by solicitors that it was in order to pay the £25, and that it could affiliate to the Labour Party, though it was claimed that it would not be affiliated in the same way as a trade union, and no delegate could commit it to Labour policy. Further, any more payments would need additional resolutions. The Management Committee then voted by a majority to implement the resolution.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Thus at the time of the General Strike the Society was still unclear about its role, and this was reflected in its contradictory response to the strike as shown in Chapter Five.

The step formally brought the Coventry Co-op into the local labour movement, where it remained for the rest of the inter-war period. At national level, the Co-op Party soon moved much closer to the Labour Party, so affiliation became less important. Locally, there were several years in which the opposition to Labour in the Society fought hard, but by 1929 the battle was over. A sign of the new relationship was the appearance of regular reports from the City Council in The Wheatsheaf, mostly written by Sidney Stringer, and giving a labour interpretation of events.⁽⁴⁶⁾ This close relationship continued throughout the 1930s. In Coventry as elsewhere

there were monthly supplements provided with copies of Reynolds News which besides giving general information about the co-operative movement and political events, publicised the work of the local Society. Many of the general articles in this supplement put forward Labour policy, and the supplement that appeared at the time of the local elections in 1936 was a Labour election special. The grip of the Labour Party on the Society attracted a further attempt by other parties to move in, for in the late 1930s, the Conservative Party employed a full time agent to deal with organisation of party supporters in the Co-ops in Coventry and surrounding towns.⁽⁴⁷⁾ He did not make much progress.

From 1929 onwards, the Society therefore played a role in the labour movement primarily as a consumers' organisation, but with social and educational attachments. Besides its growing trading concerns there were Mens' and Womens' guilds, a Junior Guild, and a variety of groups such as football teams, an orchestra, and choir. It also had an educational department, though most of its provision was vocational training for employees. Its voluntary education programme included drama and art education. While associated with the Labour Party, the Society did not play a major role in politics, nor did the Labour leadership expect it to. It provided a base for labour leaders, it brought a number of women co-operators into Labour ranks on the City Council, and it showed that a large organisation associated with Labour could be reasonably successful in commerce. This last point was the most important, for in a modest way the Society was conscious of providing an alternative to the shopocracy that so dominated the city life.

But the challenge was a muted one. Until "disrupted" by the labour influence, the Society's leadership in and after the war saw it as providing

a service to its membership and not as presenting any challenge to established authority or values. When the Labour influence was dominant, there is no evidence of a clear strategy for the Society, other than to provide credit when times were hard and look after its employees. Yet the influence of the Society was considerable. It was very much assumed in the unions and the labour party that the Society was its own special creation, and that active people in the labour movement would automatically give their custom to it. The vision of profit-free trading of co-operative enterprise and sharing the surplus was an important part of the Labour programme for the city, which envisaged Coventry as a multi-faceted co-operative society. But the co-operative venture that already existed was expected to support Labour without really contributing to it and the Management Committee in practice was left to put commercial interests before others.

A study of the activities of the Society particularly in the 1920s is of interest as it shows the growing confidence of some people in the labour movement in their ability to run the Society as an integral part of the movement. It shows leaders of a major area of economic activity accepting, albeit reluctantly in some cases, political direction and leadership from organised labour. It also shows how under the influence of members like Wale and Oliver, the Society could be both a practical example of working class providence and a repository of untouched ideals. In both cases, the Labour leadership expected it to play a subordinate role.

1 A Labour Majority

In November 1937 Labour became the majority group amongst the City Councillors. In September 1939 the country was at war, and within 14 months much of the old Coventry was destroyed. Labour did not have sufficient time

to put most of its plans into operation and therefore only a provisional assessment of its performance can be made. The Party began its rule by breaking some of the old customs. Half of the Aldermen were up for re-election, and would normally have been elected on the basis of seniority. But this would have meant that the Progressives, through having more of the longer serving Aldermen, would have had a majority in Council despite Labour having a majority of Councillors. This was clearly intolerable to Labour, and so all of the retiring Aldermen, with the exception of the non-party Colonel Wyley, were replaced by Labour Councillors, whose numbers were subsequently made up in by-elections.⁽⁴⁹⁾ At the same time, Labour took the post of Deputy-Mayor instead of letting the retiring Mayor take it. At the Council meeting that saw these changes, there were enthusiastic scenes, and "Vociferous cheers from the body of the Hall."⁽⁴⁹⁾ Clearly, there was a new broom sweeping clean.

A special Council meeting was called to enable Labour to establish a majority on all the Council Committees. Labour members were appointed to administer the General Municipal Charities, while Hodgkinson hinted that they had been used in the past "with a view to securing a vote or two at election time."⁽⁵⁰⁾ But the most important decision was to establish a Policy Advisory Committee of five. This contained the Liberal Flinn and the Conservative Prentice, and three Labour members, George Briggs, George Hodgkinson and Bill Halliwell. Sidney Stringer, who had been leader of the Labour group, had become Deputy Mayor, so the post went to Hodgkinson, with Harris his deputy. In the words of Hodgkinson, the new Committee

"Became the hammer and the anvil, in the forging fires of controversy which beset the City Fathers, and gave it some fame in the annals of English local government. The Committee became the spearhead for initiating new policies, gave head and tail to them and when they took shape, then handed the responsibility for administration to the appropriate controlling committee. This scheme-making Committee had two

great virtues; in the first place as its name implies it "advised" and restricted its function to one of an advisory character and secondly it had no power to spend money, though it put in train a lot of spending and controlled a lot into the bargain." (51)

The theme running through the changes imposed on the Council was the firm establishment of power in the hands of the Labour group, and its leadership, (Hodgkinson, Stringer, and to a lesser extent Halliwell). Nevertheless, the Policy Advisory Committee, which was viewed with alarm by some Council Officials, served as a useful forum and mobilising centre.

Throughout 1938 the Party worked with and on Council officials to produce a plan for the renovation and expansion of the city services. Towards the end of 1938 this took the form of a five year capital works programme. This was not a comprehensive redevelopment scheme, but was a much more ambitious drawing together of plans that had been achieved in the past. Over $\pounds 1\frac{1}{2}$ million were allocated with nearly a third of this going to education. New streets, road and bridge improvements, the extension of Council premises and the development of parks and open spaces, including the purchase of Coombe Abbey, were the other major features. The emphasis was on the planning of the future of the city, and the controlled expansion of the services provided by the Council in an efficient way.

However, it was a different sort of issue that attracted the most attention in the first year of the new Labour administration; the establishment of a minimum wage of $\pounds 3$ per week for all Council employees. This was particularly supported by Halliwell, who coupled the aim with attacks on the high wages and conditions of senior Council employees. Halliwell appears to have been one of the few Labour members who put more emphasis on using Council control on behalf of the immediate aims of the workers, rather than on planning for the city as a whole. But he had the full support of the Labour group

over the minimum wage, and this was carried through, giving some workers substantial pay increases. It also created a lot of difficulties with differentials, got the Council into trouble with various Joint Industrial Councils, and even provoked hostility from some trade union leaders.⁽⁵³⁾

In its first year, Labour had taken a number of ambitious programmes in hand, and also had shown it could run the Council without upheavals and with the support in one form or another, of the Council officials. Its establishment of an image of responsibility allied to progressive change helped to secure it in power at the November 1938 elections. The opposition was clearly demoralised, for five Labour seats were not contested, though Labour did not gain any extra seats.

All the social reforms that were in hand were stopped by the war, and the social reconstruction that Labour promised had to wait until after 1945. It is therefore not possible to assess the strategy of the Labour group by looking at its achievements in this period. There has to be a certain amount of conjecture as to the implications of its strategy. Its long term objective was a "Socialist Coventry" and this was construed as a large measure of public ownership and control of land, houses, schools and local industries such as gas, transport and electricity. Through the operations of a network of control, the restricted privately owned concerns could be allowed to run, provided they carried out their public responsibilities. The Party did not consider a policy that involved extending control to the big factories. The strategy did not amount to an attempt to establish working class power in the city in the sense that the Labour activists, through the Labour Party, would be able to impose themselves on other classes. The development of a specialised, professional group of Labour leaders without a mass party behind them, had inevitably loosened personal ties between the

Labour leadership and the trade unions. This inevitable division, which occurred at a time when the unions were struggling and the Labour Party growing in strength, encouraged some of the Labour group, and probably all of the Labour leadership to see the Party as the sole centre of political commitment. The unions were no longer expected to provide political leadership, nor were they expected to have strong political views. This point comes over clearly in George Hodgkinson's discussion of the problems facing the new Labour administrators, particularly the problem of loyalty:

"How to be just and reasonable in the certain conflict generated in power politics bedevilled our attempts to be fair to those who had elected us and to whom we owed fraternal loyalties. Were to be the milch cow for the trade unions and to what extent would they share the responsibility of government? In the city of militant trade unionism and with the fighting spirit in our own blood how could we comport the clashing forces? The Labour Party had power in its hands, it had socialist aims, but could it be said that our affiliates had socialism in their hearts, and were we to be activated by "divine discontent" or a scramble for a penny bun? I sometimes wondered how far a vested interest - we normally slung at the other side - influenced the leadership since it appeared to me that they had not registered the significance of the switch of power."

(53)

In the circumstances of the late 1930s it was easy for the Labour leadership to come to see the Labour Party as the repository of socialist ideals, and the trade unions as interested only in money, and to conclude therefore that the new administration had to stand firm against those who might "Kick the 'powers that be' into making sectional concessions, of unilateral advantage."⁽⁵⁴⁾ This meant that while recognising that the trade unions had "a leg in the camp of government" the Labour group would have to distance itself if need be from the unions, and consider the long term interests of the city as a whole. It also meant a detachment from the unions, and a view of being above union/management conflict. The minimum wage for Council workers showed that Labour was prepared to make

strong gestures of support to its constituents, but this was an isolated event in a period when Labour was much more concerned to develop a strategy for urban renewal.

An example of the uneasy relationship between the new Labour administration and the unions is found in Hodgkinson's account of attempts to involve workers in the management of the public industries in the city. Joint Production Committees that were presumably purely consultative were set up in the gas, water and electricity undertakings, but it was decided to go a step further in public transport and have two trade union liaison officers who would be "equal partners in the management of the transport services."⁽⁵⁵⁾ But there was clearly reluctance on both the part of management and union to make the scheme work successfully, and the Labour administration had to take vigorous action to avoid strikes of bus staff. Hodgkinson concluded that

"Despite Labour rule a municipal boss was no different from any other kind, the worker a wage earner with no other end in view than the bottom line in the pay packet." (56)

Another conclusion is that Labour was coming in from the outside, seeking to reconcile two conflicting bodies with a plan that neither of them had initiated.

Although a group of Labour Councillors, people such as Halliwell, Lee, Arnold and Griffiths, prior to November 1937, had frequently seen issues in terms of an emotional commitment to the working class, there was no sign of opposition to the leadership's policy of seeking to put itself above class commitments. Although Halliwell did clash with the other leaders during the war, it may not be correct to see him as one who represented a coherent opposition to the rest of the leadership, at least not before the War. Lack of opposition in the Labour Party meant that insofar as there was controversy and debate over socialist strategies it was between the Labour Party and the

ILP and Communist Party. One view based a strategy for socialism on a series of administrative measures in the city, while the other put the main emphasis on working class seizure of power at the point of production. What does not appear to be present in the city was an overall policy that might have gone some way to reconcile these views by seeing control of the city as the first step in a wider strategy of the working class in its progress towards full state control. As it was, by the late 1930s the gulf between the city Labour Party and the revolutionary left was of such an extent that there was little debate; each group was working in its own field in its own way.

With remarkably little opposition, the inter-war period saw a considerable shift in the relationship between the Labour Party, the trade unions, and the working class. The Party had moved from being the political expression of the trade union movement before the war to being a parallel organisation to the trade unions after the war, to being a body above the unions in the late 1930s. At all stages there was still a strong partnership between Labour and the unions, but in the 1930s this needed to be articulated and examined, while in the 1920s it was being taken for granted. This meant a changing relationship with the class as well, from being the political expression integrated into the social and industrial life of the class to being the leadership that also claimed the right to administer to the needs of the class. The Labour group saw itself as a working class group in the sense that most of its members came from a working class environment, had ideological commitments to working class points of view and sought to redress the balance in civic affairs towards the working class: the group however did not seriously think of itself as the working class in power, or even as the tribunes of the working class. In power it was a party

from the working class that yet had responsibilities to other classes. The mobilisation of the working class, other than at election times, was not a major aim as it was not essential to Labour's strategy. The Party expected allegiance from the unions and the Co-op; it required domination rather than partnership.

The Labour Party had insufficient time between coming to office at the end of 1937 and the outbreak of war in 1939 to demonstrate how great would be the change between its rule and that of the Coalition. However, it had done enough to show that there would be major changes. For the first time in the history of the city there was in power an administration that examined the social needs of the citizens and planned a series of measures to deal with them.

While this was a major achievement for the labour movement, the circumstances of this change in the fortunes of the city need to be enumerated. In the first place the collapse of the labour movement after 1920 had kept the Coalition in power after its social base had declined in importance as the city became a major industrial centre. Labour took control in Coventry later than in most other industrial centres. Secondly, by the early 1930s the Coalition was more or less finished. It had pretended that Coventry was a nineteenth century town for many years, but the pretence had to end. It was incapable of facing up to the needs of an industrial city, and its leaders were unwilling to undertake this task. The final point therefore, was that the Labour Party was the only organisation that could undertake the task of bringing Coventry's municipal undertakings into line with the needs of an industrial city. New housing estates, schools, environmental services were important if industry was not to outgrow its surroundings.

By 1937 Coalition neglect was in danger of becoming an embarrassment

to industrial employers. It was ironic that the Labour Party was needed by the employers to provide a city for industrial workers to live in.

Of course the employers saw Labour as a threat. But the neglect shown by the Coalition was also a threat. The neglect by the Coalition produced a Labour Party caught up in the need for social improvement. This, together with the widening division between Labour Party and trade unions pushed the Party into the equivocal position of the Party of modernisation and efficiency. This no doubt encouraged working class self-confidence, but supported rather than challenged the role of the engineering employers.

FOOTNOTES

The Labour Challenge

1. Hodgkinson, op.cit, p.129.
2. ibid, p.135.
3. Labour chose Alice Arnold to be Mayor in 1936, as it was its turn under an agreement with the Coalition. On this occasion, however, the Coalition refused to play the game, as it felt that a republican Mayor in Coronation year as too much. It offered to support Moseley instead, but no deal was done, and Labour had to wait a year before Alice Arnold became the first woman Mayor. She eventually left the Labour Party, disillusioned with its lack of progress. Earlier, she claimed to be a supporter of the Minority Movement.
4. T.J. Harris, in Coventry Socialist and Labour Movement Reminiscences.
5. MDT 3rd November 1922.
6. Occupations taken from local directories and the Midland Daily Telegraph.
7. Hodgkinson, op.cit, p.81.
8. Labour Party, Annual Report of Conference 1929.
9. ibid, 1930-1939.
10. Coventry Standard 10th November 1933. Hodgkinson felt that Harris was one "Who had a reputation for ranting against the evils of 'usury' and whose speeches on finance were calculated to empty any public meeting in five minutes." Hodgkinson, op.cit, p.110.
11. Coventry Standard 15/16 April 1932.
12. The Labour Organiser, No. 59, November 1925, p.12.
13. MDT 28th October 1936.
14. ibid.
15. MDT 27th January 1937.
16. Coventry Standard, 7/8th July 1933.
17. MDT 28th October 1936.
18. " 27th October 1936.
19. " 27th October 1936.
20. Coventry Searchlight November 1937.

21. Coventry Searchlight January 1937.
22. Interview with G. Hodgkinson.
23. ibid. However, he was soon replaced by a member of the Communist Party, and no doubt membership then grew.
24. W.H. Oliver, A Century of Effective Administration; The Achievements of The Coventry and District Co-operative Society Ltd., 1867-1967. Unpublished.
25. The Wheatsheaf, November 1926.
26. " " November 1929.
27. " " December 1929.
28. Oliver, op.cit.
29. The Wheatsheaf, July 1927.
30. " " May 1927.
31. " " September 1926.
32. " " June 1927.
33. " " November 1927.
34. " " May 1925.
35. " " August 1925.
36. " " September 1925.
37. " " December 1926.
38. CCS Management Board Minutes, 19th and 26th March 1919.
39. " " " " 14th September and 15th and 22nd October 1920.
40. " " " " 25th October, 21st November, and 31st December 1919.
41. CCS Management Board Minutes, 11th June 1920, 7th and 25th August 1925.
42. The Wheatsheaf, May 1927. Letter from G.Jarrams.
43. " " December 1926.
44. CCS Management Board, Minutes 5th and 26th October 1926.
45. " " " " 23rd November 1926.
46. They first appeared in The Wheatsheaf in February 1929.

47. Midland Union of Conservatives and Unionist Associations, Labour Advisory Committee Minutes, 4th April 1936, 3rd April 1937, 2nd April 1938 and 18th March 1939.
48. MDT 9th November 1937.
49. ibid.
50. MDT 24th November 1937 and 4th January 1938.
51. Hodgkinson, op.cit, p.134.
52. ibid, p.139. AEU District Committee Minutes, record a meeting between trade union officials and the Labour Group where "The Labour Group were definitely informed that they would not be allowed to usurp trade union functions." 7th July 1938.
53. Hodgkinson, op.cit, p.140.
54. ibid.
55. ibid, p.142.
56. ibid.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Housing in Coventry

Chapter Six looked at the way the education system in Coventry developed under Coalition leadership, and the way the system was used to preserve Coalition power. This chapter studies housing policies in this period in a similar way.

One difference between education and housing was that the Labour challenge was greater over housing. In the immediate post-war years the problem was acute and highly visible, and was seized on by the Labour opposition. The interest of Labour was further heightened by the existence of tenants' organisations and the clash at Stoke Heath with the Housing Committee, with the strong implications of Council corruption.

Unfortunately for Labour, over the period as a whole the issue of housing was used against it, and emerged as another bolster to Coalition social and political dominance. In 1919 the Coalition, apparently unwilling to carry out the new Housing Act which gave priority to Council building, took the daring step of vacating the Housing Committee, and leaving Labour in control of the new policy. The policy eventually collapsed, partly due to non-cooperation from private builders, and although in Coventry Labour could claim a significant achievement it was linked with this ill-fated scheme. This enabled the Coalition, when it re-took control of the Housing Committee, to justify Council neglect of building, leave the field open to private builders and concentrate on slum clearance. Labour came back strongly over the delays in slum clearance and the mounting waiting lists, but was too late to prevent housing policy appearing to be a success story for private enterprise.

I Housing Problems

The basic aim of the Labour Party was to increase the stock of houses available to working people. It was felt that most privately built houses were out of the reach of workers, so the solution lay in building council houses for rent. This policy was seen as important in showing the community as a whole that local intervention in social conditions could work, and that municipal socialism was a practical proposition. In practice, this meant pushing for more housing estates, trying to break the links between the Council and the builders, expanding direct works, and raising the quality of working class houses.

The Coalition view was that council houses were a burden on the rates, and an interfering encroachment on private enterprise. It was alive to the importance that could be attached to a successful municipal enterprise, and sought instead to encourage working people to buy their own houses. This was to be done, as we saw earlier, through the local building society, the Coventry Permanent Economic. The Directors of this body had to be men of substance, and contained in their ranks a number of Aldermen and Councillors, none of them from the Labour Party. A paternalistic building society and a strong group of local builders were the alternatives to council houses. The Coalition believed that market forces and private enterprise represented the best value for the working man. The Labour Party and the trade union movement, in pointing to the inadequacies of the city's housing, were challenging the dominance of the merchants and manufacturers in the running of the city.

The trade union movement attached as much importance to housing as did the Labour Party. Trade unionists had joined with Poole and Farren and a number of Liberals to push the Councils into providing a small number

of houses at Narrow Lane in 1907 and in 1910, the Trades Council had joined with the Co-op and the Labour Party to establish a Joint Committee on Housing. The main aim of this body was to push for more and better houses from the Council, and for proper town planning schemes.⁽¹⁾ After the war, the Trades Council and a number of unions lobbied the Housing Committee for more council houses. Another important initiative had been to campaign against rent increases during the war, and to attempt to police the Rent Restriction Act when it was passed, by setting up a Tenants' Defence League and publishing information about the Act. The Trades Council claimed in 1920 that "Thanks to the activities of the Tenants' Defence League, hundreds of exactions of illegal increases of rent have been thwarted."⁽²⁾ It encouraged the formation of council tenants' associations which seem to have existed throughout the period on most of the council estates.

Although an extension of council housing was the central part of Labour's programme, it is not clear whether they paid much attention to the mechanics of council housing. For most of the period they accepted a policy of excluding undesirable tenants from council property. Only towards the end of the period did Labour leaders accept the need to discriminate in housing for the people who could not afford to occupy council homes. Mrs. Thompson, a Labour Councillor, claimed that

"subsidised houses up and down the country did not meet the need of people who required houses. It was part of the inequality of the whole social system... Their Housing Committee, as a matter of business, had had to institute something in the way of a means test, not to keep out people whose wages were too big, but to keep people out whose wages were so small that they might get into arrears with their rent. She was utterly dissatisfied with the whole method of municipal housing." (3)

Several years earlier, Massey, the Medical Officer of Health,

commented on a similar problem:

"Council houses are allotted to 'suitable' tenants. It is in the interpretation of the word 'suitable' that the public health worker and the housing administrator do not see eye to eye. By the former the word is applied to families who urgently need rehousing because their present environment is prejudicial to health. By the housing administrator the term 'suitable' is applied to those families seeking Council dwellings, who can well and regularly pay the rent demanded therefor. These two views are irreconcilable for the very families whose existing environment is worst are most embarrassed financially." (4)

Thus, until the slum clearance programme got under way, the provision of council houses did not help the people most in need, and even the slum programme only dealt with those people who were in the clearance areas. The problems of the low paid, of the socially deprived families, the problem families, the very large families and the very small families could not be settled without special provision being made, and there is little evidence to suggest that the Labour Party had given the issues much consideration. Instead, with only a small stock of council houses available, it was the administrative approach rather than the social work one which was adopted. The result was that council tenants were sometimes treated as second-class citizens. An example is the fact that everybody wishing to move from a clearance area had to have all their possessions fumigated whether they came from infested homes or not.⁽⁵⁾ This was a humiliation for many working class families.

However, while a vigorous council house building programme by itself would not have solved all of the city's housing problems, it is clear that the lack of an adequate pool of council houses put a severe strain on the city for the whole of the inter-war period. Moreover, as we shall see, when council houses were built, they were subject to many delays.

Between 1914 and 1939 the population of the city nearly doubled from 119,000 to 234,000. About 37,000 of this increase was due to the extension of the city's boundaries, but the high birth rate, and most important of all, the migration into the city, meant that the population went up almost every year. Only two falls in population were recorded in this period, in 1920 and 1921, and this was primarily due to a discrepancy between the figures kept by the Medical Officer of Health, and the Census.⁽⁶⁾

There was therefore a constant pressure on the authorities to ensure that new housing could be found throughout the period. Though constant, the pressure was not even, for migration fell sharply between 1919 till the early 1930s. There were two periods of high pressure - the years immediately after the first war, and the years immediately before the second. The problem was greatest during the first period, as at both local and national level there was little experience of conducting house-building programmes.

It is difficult to quantify the extent of overcrowding in Coventry. Many people who worked in the city lived outside its boundaries, and although part of the housing problem, they did not figure in any of the statistics. In 1921 over 14,000 people, mainly from Bedworth and Exhall areas, to the north-east of the City, were journeying into Coventry every day. By 1927 there were over 17,000 of these commuters, and a growing number of people who lived in the city and went to work in factories outside.⁽⁷⁾

A major difficulty is the lack of acceptable criteria in defining overcrowding. It was not until 1935 that the Government adopted official standards. There were two possible definitions of overcrowding. In the first place, overcrowding existed when two persons of above ten years of age, and of different sexes, not living together as man and wife, had to share the same bedroom. Alternatively, overcrowding existed when the 'permitted

number was exceeded. In determining the permitted number, infants under one did not count, and children under ten counted as a half. All rooms were taken into account when drawing up a permitted number, except those that were less than 50 square feet and the number permitted was arrived at by allocating one or two people per room depending on marital circumstances. If either of these standards were broken, then a home was overcrowded. Both methods were open to criticism. The first excluded overcrowding of the same sex, the second allowed for a permitted number in every room, not just the bedroom. Massey, the Medical Officer of Health commented on the 1936 Housing Act that its standard was low but that a legal definition of overcrowding was a noticeable advance.⁽⁸⁾ A thorough survey, using this definition in 1936, found that 4,808 people in Coventry, 2.5% of the population, were living in overcrowded conditions. The worst overcrowding was in Longford, Radford and Walsgrave, all new suburbs. However, other surveys suggested that overcrowding was a bigger problem. One in 1923 of the population density in the city found that counting every room in a dwelling and counting every member of a family there were 8,349 people at more than two to a room - 6.4% of the population.⁽⁹⁾

Other statistics, to be treated cautiously, are available as a result of the maternity welfare service. Every year, the Annual Health report noted the number of visits made to mothers and babies, and recorded the rent of the property and whether overcrowding existed. Several thousand mothers, mainly working class, were visited each year. Overcrowding, defined as more than two persons per bedroom, presumably including all ages, was found to be very common, indeed, in 1921 55.8% of homes visited were labelled overcrowded. The proportions fluctuated somewhat from year to year, and there was a considerable reduction after 1925. By 1931 the figure for

overcrowding was down to 11.2%.⁽¹⁰⁾ This reduction must owe something to the housing programme, but also to the increased use of maternity beds in city hospitals, especially after the opening of the Gulson Road City Hospital in 1930. In that year, there were 379 expectant mothers booked in municipal hospitals, and a survey of their reasons for having children in hospital showed that 313 or 83% did so for various reasons connected with overcrowding.⁽¹¹⁾

Official figures understated the extent of overcrowding. This was acknowledged by Snell (the predecessor of Massey as Medical Officer of Health) when he wrote in 1920 "It is common knowledge that a considerable amount of overcrowding still exists, and that a large number of people occupy lodgings who would otherwise be accommodated in separate houses."⁽¹²⁾ These people were sufferers of overcrowding whether they appeared in the figures or not. That this was common knowledge can be seen by the attention given to the problem by local politicians and the Medical Officer of Health.

Considerable national attention was given to the whole question of housing even before the war was over, and it was clear that the Government was expected to take the initiative in tackling the housing problem as soon as the opportunity arose. Coventry would clearly have to formulate building programmes as soon as Government policy was known. However, just at the end of the war the Council's Housing Committee found itself engaged in a serious dispute with the tenants from its only large estate, which led to serious doubts as to whether the Housing Committee was capable of initiating a housing programme.

The Stoke Heath Rent Strike

The estate of 600 homes at Stoke Heath was built during the war with

Government assistance, and occupied in October 1916. The land was originally owned by the Ministry of Munitions and the houses were built in the parish of Stoke Heath, outside the city boundary. A tenants' association was quickly formed and a short rent strike in 1917 produced a rent reduction.⁽¹³⁾

The tenants still felt, however, that the rents on the estate were too high, and they were angered at the badly constructed houses and roads. The May 1917 agreement that had ended the rent strike had been that there would be no further reductions until 31st March 1918; having had the estate in existence for a full year, the Housing Committee would be in a position to see if they could afford another reduction. March 31st came and went however with no information being sent to the tenants' association. Complaints to the Housing Committee received the reply that certain matters were still outstanding with contractors and that final figures were not known. In the following eight months, the tenants' association sent a series of requests for information, without receiving satisfaction. Finally, a mass meeting of tenants at Stoke Heath decided on 24th November 1918 to begin a second rent strike.⁽¹⁴⁾

Initially, the strike was to get information out of the Housing Committee, but once under way, it soon became a strike for a rent reduction. It took the tenants' association several weeks to decide how much they wanted the rents to be reduced to, and eventually they came up with a figure of 2/11 off all the rents. As the three types of houses on the estate were assessed at 7/11, 8/11 and 9/11, such a demand was so great as to be unrealistic, and would have made the rents at Stoke Heath much cheaper than for the other council houses. The Housing Committee offered to take the case to arbitration, but this was rejected by the tenants until all the

information they wanted about the estate was provided for them.

The rent strike was virtually solid, and this no doubt facilitated the final appearance of the first full year's figures for the estate, which came out eight months later in December 1918. A mass meeting of tenants elected four delegates to meet the Housing Committee to discuss the figures, and as it was the day of the election, many of the tenants then formed up behind their banner and went off to vote in the Nuneaton Constituency.⁽¹⁵⁾

The following day, speakers from the estate visited other council properties, and it was agreed at all the other small estates to form a united Stoke Heath and Municipal Dwellings Tenants' Defence Association. The newly-organised body began pressing for relief from "the excessive high rents" charged for their "Inconvenient dwellings."⁽¹⁶⁾ The meeting of the deputation and the Housing Committee made no progress, as the Committee was not prepared to offer any reduction.

On January 14th, after seven weeks of the rent strike, Councillor Collington, Chairman of the Housing Committee presented its report to Council. He estimated that in the year 1919/1920 the expenses of the estate would come to £13,704 and the income from rents to £14,365. This would give a small profit, but only after knocking off the first £900 of the repairs bill for the estate. In future years, the tenants would have to meet the whole cost of repairs through the rents. These were estimated to be about £1,800 a year, and the one year concession had been made "owing to the inconvenience caused to Tenants by the unsatisfactory condition of the Stoke Heath houses." Other items of expenditure that had to be covered by the rents were poor rates, sewage, water, taxes, street lighting, insurance, rent collecting and bank charges, plus £2,152 sinking fund to pay off the capital expenditure, and £7,207 interest on loans. A tenant

justly complained that the estate would cost the Council nothing and that "in some 60 years the ratepayers will have this estate free of all costs to them."⁽¹⁷⁾

The tenants were being made to shoulder the entire burden, including the extra charges that arose from building during the war. They were particularly annoyed that repairs were added to the rent bill. As they were already paying comparatively high rents they felt, not unreasonably, that they were entitled to trouble free accommodation and a clean environment. As this was lacking, they not only had to suffer the inconveniences but had to pay for them as well.

Before long, complaints about the state of repairs at Stoke Heath developed into a full scale attack on members of the Housing Committee and the contractors who had built the estate. However, although the Housing Committee knew the strength of feeling, it refused to offer any reduction. The two Labour Councillors on the Committee, Poole and Wale, showed concern at the financial burden of the tenants, but made it clear at two Council meetings that they thought the rent strike should be called off. Poole in particular was most emphatic; "It was about time," he said,

"the Committee told these tenants quite plainly that this no rent-strike business had got to come to an end (Hear Hear). It should go forth to the tenants and the public that whilst the Committee had given every consideration to the matter and had shown every desire to meet the tenants - and they had met them by making two reductions - it was not at all likely that the rents would be reduced, and that the Committee would insist on maintaining their position and seeing that these rents were paid. (Hear Hear)." (18)

But the two Labour Councillors found themselves in opposition to large sections of the labour movement as the dispute dragged on and relations between the tenants/^{and}the Council deteriorated. The tenants'

leaders were publicly supported by the Trades Council, the CEJC, the WU and other local unions. It also attracted messages of support from unions and tenants' bodies throughout the country. A. Read, Chairman of the Stoke Heath tenants was able to declare that "They had thousands of Coventry Trade Unionists behind them, and the eyes of many parts of the country were on Stoke Heath."⁽¹⁹⁾ A mass meeting at Pool Meadow was attended by 6,000 people, and had a wide range of local labour movement speakers. Speakers pointed to the wider significance of the struggle, and to the need to strengthen the Trades Councils' Tenants' Defence League. James Read, the late secretary of the CEJC, attacked the design and construction of the Stoke Heath houses, saying they "represented the Coventry City Council's opinion as to what was a suitable house for those people commonly known as the working class."⁽²⁰⁾ The tenants also had the support of Bannington and Hook, the two other Labour Councillors, both of whom paid visits to the estate - something that Wale and Poole do not appear to have done during the dispute.

The solidness of the rent strike led to charges from the Mayor and others that there had been intimidation on the estate. Tenants' leaders denied this, and pointed out that they knew of a small number who were paying and were not being victimised. There was at least one newspaper report of effigies being burnt, but nothing to suggest that anything other than strong moral pressure was used. The tenants' association operated through mass meetings, and these were normally very well attended with as many as a thousand people at some of them, and with unanimity of views between the leaders and the tenants.⁽²¹⁾ The estate was still somewhat isolated from other houses, and this no doubt strengthened the sense of community. It also made it easier to have large meetings, which were

called by ringing bells and blowing bugles.

The Housing Committee, faced with a united front, began to threaten the tenants. A letter from the Town Clerk on 8th January 1919 concluded "that unless the arrears of rent are paid at once proceedings by distraint will be taken for their recovery." This was read out at a tenants' meeting, and it was recorded that "when the last paragraph, relating to distraint was reached there was much groaning and hissing."⁽²²⁾

The Council meeting on 14th January called for an enquiry by the Local Government Board, and the end of the rent strike, and in sending this information to the tenants, the Town Clerk wrote that the strike was "very damaging as regards the provision of working class housing in Coventry, which are so urgently necessary." The tenants' association insisted "that they were helping the city by insisting that houses like those at Stoke Heath were not only not worth the rent charged, but were not the sort of houses that municipal or any other tenants required."²³ In February, distraint proceedings were taken against 10 of the tenants, including Read. At the County Court, the Registrar granted the Corporation the right to distraint, but held the orders over for one month. Councillors were not pleased with this; one, Gorton, declared "by the time we can execute them (the distraint orders) we shall find sufficient goods and chattels to pay a fortnight's rent," instead of the ten weeks which was owing by this time. He went on to claim that "not only did the tenants clear out owing rent but they even sold the key for 30s."⁽²⁴⁾ These comments did little to resolve the dispute.

The Council meeting on 14th January also brought out into the open charges that some members of the Housing Committee had been acting as sub-contractors at Stoke Heath, and were partially to blame for the bad state

of houses on the estate. The newspaper report of the meeting commented on the high attendance - some 28 out of 48 being present - a comment on the state of the Council after five years without an election.

Wale, who had been attacked by the tenants for not calling for a rent reduction, made a long speech justifying his position, and launching an attack on the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Housing Committee at the time the contract was placed. These two, Councillors Howells and Nicholls, while still on the Council, had long since stopped attending either Council or Housing Committee meetings. Wale went on to attack the contractors, Alban Richards and Co., as "a name of evil repute in the City of Coventry today." The Government Architect, responsible for the scheme, had seldom been present, and as a result "a lot of things crept into the scheme that were never intended by the City or Architect." The Corporation's fair wages clause was violated, as was the decision not to allow sub-contractors to operate without written Corporation consent. The Chief Clerk of the Works had been very bad, and he cited cases of bad work on the houses, including one house where the ceiling had fallen down six times. He concluded:

"So far as Stoke Heath was concerned, it was a case of vultures to the feast. Every jerry-builder in South Wales came here and had a share in building these houses and one of the most regrettable features was that certain private companies, in which were interested certain members of the Council, were also sub-contractors."

Councillor Orton also criticised some of the people involved in the scheme. "Persons who made enquiries as to how the scheme was proceeding were threatened with proceedings. Personally he was threatened with a libel action. One was not allowed to go into the scheme at all to see what was going on." He had continued to make enquiries, but "was accused by a prominent member, (of Council) who was connected with the scheme, of being

contaminated by some of the Labour leaders." Another Councillor called for an investigation saying "If something was not done to help and assist the scheme it would mean the death blow to municipal housing in Coventry." Poole supported Wale's allegations and declared that "Disgraceful and dishonest practices have gone on in connection with the scheme." Eventually, the Council agreed unanimously on the need for an enquiry and on arbitration by the Local Government Board. Although agreeing to go to arbitration, the Council continued to refuse to accept a rent reduction, and carried on with distraint orders.⁽²⁵⁾

The decision by the court to postpone distraint opened the way to a settlement. The tenants agreed to go to arbitration, and the first stage of the Inquiry was heard before a Local Government Board officer on 27th February. The tenants were represented by their own barrister, while the Town Clerk put the Council's case. He again claimed that any reduction in rent would have to be met by ratepayers. He pointed out that the contract was awarded to Alban Richards and Co. because their bid was much lower than any others.⁽²⁶⁾ The tenants' case was also reiterated. They felt the rents were too high, the buildings poor, and objected to have to pay for the whole cost of the estate, which included items such as a new road and £2,400 for builders' huts. Both sides agreed that the Government ought to provide more funds for the scheme. Both Poole and Wale pressed for a full enquiry into the way the houses had been built:

"Councillor Poole warmly remarked that unless this or some other enquiry went thoroughly into the question of construction there were those on the City Council who would press for another and full enquiry. (Hear Hear). 'And if we don't get that it will be heard of in the House of Commons.' "

Nicholls and Howells were not present, and the Inquiry was postponed to hear their views. The tenants' association made it clear that they would

not be bound by the decision of the Inspector from the Local Government Board, but that a final decision had to be made at a mass meeting. (27)

By the time the Inquiry was resumed, on 12th March, a report of the Clerk of the Works on the repairs done in 1917/18 showed the extent of the jerry-building that had gone on. Drain covers on the estate had all been replaced, the tar pavements were sinking, water stop taps had been deficient. In over half of the houses the cooking ranges had been wrongly set; fires were badly built, grates not properly set, while in many cases bricks in bends of chimneys were causing them to smoke. The outside brickwork had been so badly done that it took 10 bricklayers four months work to improve it. One third of all the ceilings on the estate had to be replaced, when it was discovered they were 85 per cent sand and 15 per cent plaster instead of 66 per cent and 33 per cent. On 196 houses, ceiling joists had been missing; in most houses, some doors and casements did not fit. The outside woodwork on the houses had not been primed, and the paint was peeling off, whily putty was coming off the windows. Instead of providing proper dressers, the contractors responsible had merely nailed fronts to fixed shelves and according to the report, had saved themselves 30/- a time. The report was a strong indictment of the main contractors (28) for not supervising the work, and the rapacity of many of the sub-contractors. It also made clear how unfair it was to put the burden on the tenants, who had had repair workers on the estate ever since they moved in.

The second session of the Inquiry lasted for seven hours, mainly because of the presence of Howells and Nicholls; Howells' opening speech lasted for over two hours, and he made several other contributions later. However, little that was new emerged. Nicholls admitted that his company had been responsible for much of the plastering work, but denied allegations

of weakening the plaster. Howells tried to exonerate the contractor, by blaming the quality of workers on the job, and praising Alban Richards and Co. for tendering such a cheap contract. He later admitted that he also had been involved in the sub-contracting work, his son being manager of a firm that did much of the concreting work. Poole again complained of "A policy initiated not by the Committee but through the influence of the Chairman and Vice-chairman by pushing sub-contracting to an intolerable and improper extent."⁽²⁹⁾

In light of the revelations, the report of the Inspector was restrained. The Inspector blamed the contractor for submitting too low a contract, and war-time conditions for inferior labour and materials and undue haste. He criticised the excessive sub-contracting, and referring to the Councillors who were involved in the scheme, he exonerated them from suggestions of inferior work, but went on to say "It will be generally agreed, however, that such connection is inadvisable for members of public authorities."⁽³⁰⁾ It is not possible to discover the full extent of the involvement of various councillors in the contracting and sub-contracting of work over the scheme, but it seems reasonable to say that insofar as anyone was responsible for the scheme it was the councillors who were also sub-contracting, and they were therefore at least partially responsible for the disastrous state of the houses at Stoke Heath. Howells, who had been the Housing Committee Chairman, left the Council soon after the war, but Nicholls remained a Councillor until 1924.

At the end of the Inquiry the Inspector formally called for a 5d reduction in the Stoke Heath rents. The Council agreed to accept this, though with a bad grace. The tenants' leaders put the offer to a ballot, and recommended acceptance. A reduction of only 5d was much less than they

had asked for, but it must have been clear to them there was little prospect of improving it. Back at Stoke Heath, the leaders encountered opposition; the report back was a rowdy affair that ended in disorder. It had not been possible to put the motion for a ballot, but one was carried out anyway, and showed a majority of 342 to 116 in favour of accepting the offer and ending the rent strike.⁽³¹⁾ This was done on 15th March 1919. It had lasted 16 weeks. Although the majority of the tenants were clearly against continuing the struggle, the leaders were accused of trickery, and it is strange that over 100 of the tenants did not register their votes. Nevertheless, later meetings of the tenants' association reaffirmed support for their leaders.

III Labour's Building Attempts

The rent strike served to focus attention on the housing needs of the workers in the city, not only the need for more houses, but for ones of higher quality. It encouraged tenants on the other estates and in the Government hutments to push for better conditions, and stimulated the Trades Council Tenants' Defence League. However, the attempt to get this body to unite with the Stoke Heath tenants collapsed "from inanition."⁽³²⁾ Despite some fears to the contrary, the strike did not hold up attempts to build more council houses. Its most important effect, however, was to question whether the Coalition councillors on the Housing Committee were capable of carrying through a council housing programme. It also greatly affected the morale of those on the Committee, and seems to have been responsible for the situation in November 1919, when, after the first election for six years, every non-Labour member of the Housing Committee resigned, and

were replaced by five new Labour Councillors and one Liberal who had been sympathetic to Labour in the past. Labour found itself in a situation of overall minority, but with a large majority on an important Committee at a time when a new programme had to be carried out. (It had already been drawn up). Although the Coalition councillors saw themselves as generously making way for the new party, their action was an extraordinary admission that they were either not capable, or did not have the inclination, to carry through a vigorous housing policy. Their withdrawal was no doubt due to the Government giving a new, interventionist role to local authorities.

Thus for the three years from November 1919 to November 1922, the Labour group on the Council had the opportunity to develop their housing programme. However, they were constrained by Government policy, which abandoned all attempts to encourage council building in mid-1921, and by the majority on the City Council who were not so demoralised as to see an attack on local builders go unfought.

In July 1919, the Housing and Town Planning Act was passed. For the first time, local authorities were given the responsibility of providing new homes, and were given assistance to do this. Authorities were to build houses and charge rents that working people could afford, and any deficits from the scheme, over and above the value of 1d rate, would be met by the Government. In other words, Councils were being encouraged to build as many houses as possible for the cost to them of only 1d rate. Unfortunately, no provision was made to deal with the shortages of finance, materials and labour, and with financial responsibility removed from local authorities, they competed against each other for resources, and against private industry for capital. As a result, the cost of houses rose to an unacceptable level. (33)

In October 1919 the Housing Committee decided on a three-year building programme that would produce 2,000 permanent new homes, later increased to 2,150. The houses were scheduled to meet the unsatisfied demand then existing, and the expected growth in population until 1922. The figure was not arrived at on a scientific basis, and could be criticised as being inadequate. However, the Town Clerk commented "It did not appear to them to be at all likely that more than 2,150 houses could in practice be built during the three years covered by their review."⁽³⁴⁾

Most of the houses were to be built at Radford to the north-west of the city, the least developed side. Land was acquired there for a 138 acre estate. Some building would be done at Stivichall, Stoke Heath and Binley Road. In the last two places, the houses would be outside the city boundary, and it was agreed to build them first.

At the same time the Housing Committee had to decide what to do with the munitions hutments and hostels that had been put up to the north of the city during the war. Although they were meant to be temporary, most of them were still occupied after the war, and the Committee decided to take over the leases from the various Government departments, and convert them to short-life housing. The Foleshill Tenants' Association protested against the preservation of the hostels at Holbrook Lane, claiming they were unhealthy and inconvenient, as well as having high rents. They were supported on the Housing Committee by George Wickes and Alice Arnold,⁽³⁵⁾ but the majority of Labour members felt that they could not close down any accommodation as there was no alternative. Even the hostels at Whitmore Park, where the dormitories were divided into cubicles, and the tenants had to pay 6d a week extra for the use of the kitchen, were kept open.

As well as the Council programme, it was agreed that private builders

would be responsible for over 500 houses and would sell them to the Council. Despite protests from one of the building unions, it was decided that 600 of the Council houses would be two-bedroomed. Most of the other houses had three. The scheme had been drawn up before Labour got its majority, so its main task was to see that the scheme was carried out. If it had had a majority earlier, it is doubtful if it would have increased the number of houses to be built, as there was a fear that the Council would be overstretching itself.

What Labour did do was to establish a new Council Committee - the Production Committee. It contained representatives of builders and building workers, as well as members of the Housing Committee, and its object was to make sure that labour and materials would be provided for council buildings. Because of the shortages, and the fact that after the war a lot of commercial building was going on, the Production Committee had to try to get priority for house building and interfere in the commercial life of the city to a much greater extent than had ever been done before. It attempted to delay and prohibit the construction of inessential buildings, places of amusement and recreation in particular being frowned on. This upset many interests, and the Committee soon found that its work was being hindered by Council, which overturned many of its decisions. The Coalition was prepared to tolerate an extension of council building, but not at the expense or interference in the activities of themselves and their friends. Eventually, after 10 months of frustration, all the members of the Committee resigned, and the Council did not bother to replace them.

The Housing Committee itself soon ran into problems. Estimates had to be increased for the Binley Road scheme, and a three-bedroomed house with a parlour and living room cost £990 15s to build. (The houses at Stoke

Heath had cost £270 during the War). By November 1921, despite the fact that only 328 permanent homes had been built, the deficit on the scheme was £19,339. This rose to £38,000 by 1923.⁽³⁶⁾ The Council contribution in each year was only just over £2,000, the product of a penny rate. Even with the reduced Council commitment, the rents in the new homes were high: in the large homes the rent was 15/- a week, in the smallest homes it was 10/6d. However, by 1922 the rents had been reduced slightly due to a fall in the cost of living, while the rents in other areas, including Stoke Heath, went up in 1920 and 1921.

By the summer of 1920, it was clear that the housing programme was behind schedule, yet it was at this point that Ministry of Health officials tried to intervene to push for more building. The Housing Commissioner, having seen the Coventry programme, requested that work begin on another 1,500 houses at once. The request was phrased in such a way that the Committee was afraid that "Some coercive action might be taken against Coventry by the Ministry" if it did not comply. Notwithstanding this, the Housing Committee decided that it could not speed up its programme, and was able to finally convince Ministry officials of this. Yet it was a measure of the extreme shortage of housing in the city, and of the inadequacy of the housing programme.⁽³⁷⁾

Although the financial losses of the assisted housing scheme fell mainly on the Government, the City still had to make a heavy capital outlay. It was this which proved to be the weakest aspect of the scheme. By July 1920 capital expenditure had gone over £910,000 and by March 1921 the Housing Committee was asking private builders not to build any more houses for sale to the Council, as they had no money left. The scheme at Radford was put back, and it was clear that the programme was slowly running down. Yet the

abrupt change of Government policy in July 1921 when the Assisted Housing Scheme was terminated, came as a shock to the Committee. It reported to the Council that "The housing position in Coventry is almost as pressing as it ever was, as is shown by the fact that there are still upwards of 3,000 applicants on the books." It proposed a motion to Council strongly protesting against Government action saying "In Coventry, the result will be that the urgent needs of the population cannot be met, that many months of labour and expense in preparatory work will be wasted, and that the Corporation will be left with large areas of land with which they are unable to deal." The motion was defeated. (38)

The final comment on the Council's first post-war venture came from the Town Clerk. The scheme had aimed at 2,150 houses in three years;

"Altogether, in five years, the Assisted Housing Scheme has produced a total of 629 permanent houses and 738 temporary houses in converted hostels - a total of 1,367. During the same period private enterprise has produced about 580 houses, not all, of course, of a working class character.... While this compares favourably with what most other towns have been able to accomplish, it falls far below what the Council regarded in 1919 as the absolute minimum, and it is a matter of common knowledge that the present need for houses is at least as great as it has ever been." (39)

It is interesting to note that despite the big effort made nationally and locally to stimulate the building of council houses, in Coventry almost as many privately built houses were completed as those publicly built. The combination of a flawed scheme and a hostile attitude by local builders was responsible for this.

Although the Labour group remained in the majority on the Housing Committee for another fourteen months, the collapse of the assisted housing scheme meant the collapse of Labour initiative. There was no new building and no new programme. The Labour members came out of the

experience convinced that they would need greater powers to get the building under way, and some method of dealing with what they saw as builders rings responsible for pushing up the cost of houses. For the rest of the time, the work of the Housing Committee was routine - fixing rents, meeting tenants' leaders, supervising and servicing the estates, and trying to collect the large arrears that accumulated between 1920 and 1923 as the depression hit the city.

By the time the Conservative Government passed the 1923 Housing Act, many of the Labour members of the Housing Committee had lost their seats on the Council, and the Committee had reverted back to Coalition control. The new Housing Act aimed at the encouragement of private builders, and so was in accordance with the views of the majority of the Committee. Government subsidies of £75 a house were given to builders providing working class houses, and the Committee added to this its own subsidy of £25 a house, in the hope of subsidising 600 houses built by private enterprise. Most of the houses were eventually built, but often not completed until 1925. It was hoped that well-off workers would buy them, and less well-off ones would be able to move into the vacated houses, a process of "filtering up." But the subsidies only applied when the house cost less than £600, and private builders, to make sure they collected the subsidies, produced inferior houses. Most of those built in Coventry under the Act were either two-storey or one-storey cottages, or flats or bungalows. This aspect of the Act was strongly resented by the labour movement.

The Housing Act of 1924, a product of the first Labour Government, offered the Council a new chance to put an ambitious programme into operation. Subsidies of £9 a year for forty years were to be provided, and local authorities were expected to add half again, making a total subsidy

of £13 10s. Rents were to make up the difference between the subsidy and the cost of the houses. There were a number of special conditions necessary for buildings to qualify for the subsidy; they had to be built for letting, and the rents should not be above the level of normal pre-war rents for working class houses. In practice, this meant that private builders reacted in a hostile way to the Act. The Town Clerk commented in a report to the Housing Committee, "It seems unlikely, however, that private enterprise will provide houses in any large numbers under the rather onerous 'special conditions.' "(40) Councillor Ivens, a prominent local builder declared "Government interference made it impossible for private enterprise to provide houses for the working classes. The report of the committee provided ample evidence that houses could not be built as an economic proposition." (41) This provoked other councillors who had outside interests to suggest various ways round the problem, either by selling land at Radford cheaply to builders, or contracting with builders to build smaller and cheaper houses. But the Housing Committee was bound by the Act, and by 1924 again had a Labour Chairman (Moseley) and made no concessions. Decent houses for working people were to be built, but as the Committee was still dependent on the need to place contracts with local builders, it was still possible for these people to hold up and slow down the Committee's scheme.

In considering action under the 1924 Act, the Housing Committee was influenced by the Council's senior officials. The Town Clerk produced a report which was fairly favourable to the idea of a building programme, but Sydney Larkin, as City Treasurer, expressed hostility to it. He felt that the capital sums required would be too great, and that interest rates would be too big a burden on the rates. He also recorded his view that the

scheme would break down nationally.⁽⁴²⁾ He may well have been influenced by Conservative attacks on the "spendthrift" Labour Government.

Despite this, the Housing Committee again prepared quite ambitious plans, mindful of the 4,000 names on the housing list. The Radford estate, victim of the collapse of previous plans was to be developed, with 1,300 council houses and 900 houses built by private enterprise to qualify for the housing subsidy. It was intended to complete them within two years, but, as with the assisted housing scheme, building soon got delayed. Moseley, Chairman of the Housing Committee, made it clear that he felt that one of the aims of the Act was "to break the building rings formed under the Addison Scheme. They did not want any more houses at £1,000."⁽⁴³⁾ Local builders in turn made it clear that they would hold out for better terms, and seek to oppose onerous conditions such as the employment of a particular quota of apprentices. The result was that the local builders failed to produce the houses on time. Moseley complained that the Housing Committee "Offered a square deal to the builders in Coventry, and they were not prepared to accept it....When they were asked to sign contracts they put forward all manner of excuses." He claimed builders who had contracted to provide as little as twenty houses were asking for 6 years to complete them.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The Housing Committee soon had to produce a revised programme making concessions to private builders. The programme of 2,200 houses was reduced to 1,907, with an extra 243 houses to be built by private enterprise outside the Housing Acts, and therefore not for working people. Building did not start at Radford until 1926, the year that the Committee had hoped to complete its programme. It was agreed that the first 750 houses were to be built by 1928, and the rest by 1929, but in the end the scheme was not

completed until 1930, and the housing list remained as high as ever. The two-year scheme had taken six years, even in a reduced form.

Although delayed, the Radford estate turned out to be the only major estate built by the Council in the inter-war years. Building continued on the estate until 1932 when there was a complete standstill, by which time Council policy had switched to giving priority to slum clearance. At the end of 1932 the National Government abruptly ended all the subsidies payable to local authorities under the various Housing Acts. Henceforth working class housing was to be the domain of private builders. The reason for this was that the private builders had built enough of the larger houses to satisfy most of the demand, and were looking for new outlets. Moreover, lower interest rates and cheaper labour costs made it possible for private builders to make a profit from the provision of working class houses. In practice, the new policy meant the end of large-scale council building, both in Coventry and elsewhere. As an alternative to large-scale building, the local authorities were encouraged to tackle the slum problem. The National Government created a campaign led by the Prince of Wales to switch public attention to slum clearance, which was presented as a great crusade of the age.

IV Slum Clearance

There was certainly a need for slum clearance, though not at the expense of the development of new housing estates. In Coventry, the shortage of accommodation had prevented the operation of the parts of the Housing Acts that concerned the improvement or destruction of sub-standard dwellings for many years. Between 1916 and 1930 there was an almost complete standstill

in the improvement in the stock of housing. In the 1928 Annual Report, Snell concluded "The process of delay and dilapidation in the older property, and perhaps in some of the newer, is such that a larger staff of sanitary inspectors is called for. Housing conditions are not as they should be; nor are they as they might be with a more adequate staff."⁽⁴⁵⁾ In fact the city did not employ a full-time Housing Inspector until 1930. The Housing Act of that year gave the opportunity to end the neglect of fourteen years by providing subsidies for new houses for people moved from slums; it would allow the rehousing of slum dwellers at rents they could for the most part afford. Massey in 1930 declared "The stage is now set for a resolute attack on slum conditions," though he added, in a realistic vein of caution: "It will take yet a little time for the new machinery to gain momentum."⁽⁴⁶⁾

In considering the needs of the city, Massey wrote

"The unfit houses in Coventry are generally so situated that (1) they are individually scattered or (2) they constitute comparatively small groups located here and there over the central older parts of the City. The groups of unfit properties are largely in the form of 'courts' which latter are a legacy of the early industrial era, when the unfortunate policy obtained of maximum housing on minimum area of ground." ⁽⁴⁷⁾

A five year plan was agreed on, whereby five small areas would be cleared, as well as a number of individual houses. At least 225 houses were to be destroyed, 600 repaired or improved, and 250 new houses built. Although these figures were to be regarded as the minimum, they did not represent a "massive attack on slum conditions."

There still remained the hostels. Smith, the Town Clerk, admitted that it had been necessary to give "A life for the temporary dwellings far beyond what had been contemplated, and they degenerated into drab and

cheerless places before the time came when they could be demolished."⁽⁴⁸⁾ Massey simply commented "While the hostels are scarcely to be called 'slums' they are not very desirable places of habitation." By 1930 there were still 649 Council-owned or leased hostels, and 377 privately owned. It was hoped to clear them all by 1935.

But by 1935, the slum clearance programme had still not been put into action. Coventry was no different in this respect from many other local authorities. The response to the Housing Act had been so poor that Circular 1331 had been issued by the Ministry of Health calling for a comprehensive programme of clearance for five years. As a result Coventry drafted a scheme much more ambitious than the previous one. Twenty-four areas containing 937 dwellings and 3,600 people were to be cleared, along with 70 individual houses. This was four times greater than the original plan. There were also a number of hutments and houses owned by the Council awaiting clearance, which made a total of 1,572 homes to be destroyed, a third of which did not qualify for grants under the 1930 Act. Massey, in his report congratulated the Council on its ambitious policy declaring "The year 1933 was an epic year in the annals of the anti-slum movement."⁽⁴⁹⁾

Although a number of houses were demolished in 1934, the programme did not get fully under way until 1935. By 1938 the worst of the courts had been swept away, and most individually unfit houses had been demolished. It was more difficult to abolish all the hutments, especially those privately owned, and it was difficult to step up the building rate for new homes for the people moving from the slums. At the same time a survey of overcrowding in the city found it existed for the most part in houses due to be demolished, so the Council decided to build an extra 200 special houses for large families. The war intervened before these were put up, and

before the slum programme was completed. Massey commented "The war has forced a temporary suspension to many cherished ideals in the sphere of social reform. The cessation of the slum clearance is a case in point." (50)

Although the slum clearance programme was not completed, it was the first attempt to root out bad housing since the early days of the Industrial Revolution over a century earlier. In a few years city officials and the Housing Committee were able to break the back of a problem that had been neglected for far too long. The fact that slum areas were on a small scale does not mean that they were not as bad as any that could be found in the country. Massey, at a public enquiry into the plans for No. 1 and No. 2 clearance areas, claimed that all the houses there were dilapidated and some were 300 years old. They were built 95 to the acre - a few years later vigorous protests were raised against Standard Motors for building at 18 to the acre, as labour movement spokesmen felt that this was too much. He went on,

"In Court 20, certain of the houses had as little as $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet of space between their fronts and the rear walls of other houses in the area. Forty of the premises in the area were grossly damp, only six had ventilated larders, and the occupiers of the other houses had to keep their food in dark damp cupboards or boxes." (51)

He also provided figures which showed that while the birth rate for the city as a whole was 14.42 in 1932, it was nearly 24 in No. 1 Clearance Area and over 36 in No. 2 Clearance Area. The death rate for the city was 10.18; for No. 1 Area it was 16.78, for No. 2 Area it was 33.76. Worst of all, the infant mortality rate in No. 1 Area was 283.2, compared with 63.4 in the city as a whole - over a quarter of the children born in the slums died in infancy. (52) These facts did not stop the owners of the houses taking the Council to court in an effort to stop the clearance programme.

Comparative success in slum clearance was achieved at the cost of a general intervention by the Council in the field of house building. After 1932, nearly all Council building was concerned with rehousing slum dwellers. Other buildings were mainly for houses demolished as a result of new street schemes, such as the creation of Corporation Street. A few hundred extra houses were built from 1936 onwards, but these were negligible compared to the record of private builders.

V The Housing Boom

With Government encouragement, the 1930s saw a private building boom all across the country, but the achievements of builders in Coventry were spectacular even in these conditions. From 1933 to 1938, 17,817 houses were built by private enterprise in the city, with the annual total growing year by year. In 1938, well over 4,000 houses were built.⁽⁵³⁾ In 1931 4.2 out of every 1,000 people in England and Wales lived in Coventry, but between 1933-38, private building in Coventry accounted for 11.2 per thousand of all the new private buildings throughout the United Kingdom.⁽⁵⁴⁾ This meant that the age of the housing stock in the city was lower than elsewhere. In 1939 only 30% of the population of England and Wales were living in houses built since 1919, but in Coventry, by 1938 just under half of the houses, 48.5%, had been built since 1919.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Tables proudly produced by the Midland Daily Telegraph showed that in the year ending 31st March 1936, Coventry was the twenty-third largest county borough in England, but outside the London boroughs, was seventh in the number of houses built. In that year it built only 100 fewer houses than Manchester, despite the fact that its population was less than a quarter of Manchester's.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Coventry was the success story for the private builders in this period.

The ratio of Council houses to private houses in Coventry was very different from the national one. Between 1933 and 1938 24.6 per cent of new houses constructed in the United Kingdom were by local authorities. In Coventry this figure was 8.7 per cent.⁽⁵⁷⁾ This was important, for while the total housing stock was rising rapidly, there was still a shortage of cheap houses to rent. In April 1937 there were still over 2,200 families on the housing waiting list and it was growing. Given a rising population the achievements of the builders were not enough to satisfy all the demand. Moreover, a small stock of Council houses meant that the poor suffered, as they could not afford to buy or rent new houses. Councillor Bob Cramb claimed that of the seven thousand or so houses built by private enterprise between 1933 and 31st March 1937, only 700 were built for letting.⁽⁵⁸⁾ This acted against the interests of the poor, but also must have meant that many working people were buying their own homes, as in a predominantly working class city there were not enough middle class families to buy that many houses.

This is confirmed by a study of the records of the Coventry Permanent Economic Society. There was a steady growth in the number of investors in the inter-war period, from just over 2,000 in 1915 to over 21,000 in 1939.⁽⁵⁹⁾ This meant that one household in three in the city were investing with the society, and there must have been many other citizens investing with other societies as well. In the period 1932 to 1938, the years of the housing boom, the number of investors rose from 15,133 to 20,583, and there was a much greater proportional rise in borrowers, from 4,161 to 10,763.⁽⁶⁰⁾ If there was a similar rise with other building societies, then thousands of working class people must have been buying

either new or second-hand houses in these years.

The success of private builders in the mid-1930s was in strong contrast to their failure to provide houses for the Council at Radford and elsewhere in the 1920s. With the decline in building costs, and without the need to employ union labour, or to employ a high proportion of apprentices, local builders could make substantial profits from all types of houses. Though not always cooperating with council programmes, the builders were not hostile to the Housing Committee for most of the time. On some occasions they were able to establish a close relationship, and tried to encourage a situation where the Council would do much of the preliminary work, such as buying and clearing land, granting all the necessary permissions, and then selling it cheaply to builders. A good example of this was in 1937 when the Council decided to encourage private builders to put up 500 more houses. It was agreed to sell off parts of the Stoneleigh Estate at £300 an acre, despite Labour protests that the going price for building land was between £450 and £600.⁽⁶¹⁾ It seems that many councillors who stood for economy in public spending could reconcile this with making money out of the Council.

Even had the Housing Committee wanted to, it was difficult to control and supervise all aspects of the housing boom, and it was left for the most part to the Labour group to protest against abuses. Thus there was a big row on the Council over granting contracts to W.H. Jones and Co. as Labour contended that it did not honour the Council's fair wage clause, and had been in dispute with building unions for eighteen months over payment of apprentices. There was also a row which led to "Scenes unparalleled in the history of the Coventry City Council" when the Council defeated a Labour attempt to withdraw planning permission for the building

of houses by the Standard Motor Company at Canley. Labour Councillors criticised the building of houses at 18 to the acre, and the fact that many of them had only two bedrooms. The debate was cut short, and this provoked violent objections. On being challenged, only one of the councillors supporting the scheme admitted to having shares in the company.⁽⁶²⁾ Although Labour lost that particular battle, it was able to discourage employers from making many large scale attempts to provide company housing estates. When questioned on this point in 1937, the Town Clerk replied "that workmen had strong objections to being tied down, and this was so strong that companies would not accept that responsibility."⁽⁶³⁾

B.B. Gilbert had concluded that "of all the missed opportunities of the inter-war period, perhaps the failures in housing were the most unpardonable."⁽⁶⁴⁾ In view of the large number of houses that were built in the city in the 1930s, this condemnation has to be qualified. However, the housing problem even in Coventry was still a long way from solution in 1939. In 1938 the population grew by more than 23,000; given the then average size of households, this would have required over 6,600 new houses, but the total built was just over 4,600, and some of these were required for rehousing. With growing migration, the city ended the decade with problems of overcrowding that were similar to the situation after the war. Nevertheless, it has to be recognised that private builders made a better show in Coventry than almost anywhere else, and this was primarily due to the comparatively higher standard of living in the city than in most other areas.

The comparative success of house building in Coventry was a potent weapon used by the Coalition against the Labour Party. Labour had been given a free hand in the post-war years to develop council estates, but

the Coalition could point out that these puny attempts were far out-distanced by the amount of private building in the 1930s. Of course such a comparison was unfair, as economic conditions had eased in the 1930s, and Labour has been beset by the Council, the builders and the Government. This did not stop it from being a strong argument. When the Coalition claimed that council housing was inadequate to the needs of the city, it was also claiming that municipal enterprise would not work, that socialism was unrealistic, and that the Labour Party was a group of spendthrift idealists. In practice the Coalition did not go this far, nor was it opposed to all municipalisation. It accepted that there had to be a role for council housing, and for the planning of housing schemes. However, it endeavoured to see that this was a subordinate role, and that private enterprise was seen to be working. This policy was regarded as being of paramount importance, and the awareness of the Coalition to the need to boost private builders can be seen in the activity of the majority councillors in holding back municipal houses and direct works, in the hostility of a section of the Council officials to ambitious programmes, and above all, in the refusal of local builders to cooperate with the Housing Committee when they felt it did not suit them.

The buying of houses by working people was also of considerable political significance, and served to strengthen existing ideology. The phenomenon of large numbers of working people buying their own homes was a new one, and was used to persuade people that they were workers of a different kind to the propertyless labourers of the past. Although different pressures can be isolated for separate examination, they were not felt in isolation, and a rise in the standard of living for some workers, and the acquisition of property was an event that served to bolster the

existing social system because to a considerable extent it had not come about through trade union pressure. In this context, owner occupiers were potential recruits to a campaign to keep down the rates by avoiding the expansion of social services. Buying a house was a very concrete sign of rising standard of living.

In the 1930s this rise was part of the benefit to working people that an unfettered industrial policy could achieve. Most workers owed their rising living standards to increased piece-work earnings, in turn a product of the employers' success in deskilling the factories. The higher earnings had not come about as a result of labour movement activity. Indeed the skilled unions had an equivocal attitude to high earnings, particularly when it was combined with low basic rates. To many workers the aims of the unions, particularly unions like the AEU and NUVB were irrelevant. With money to buy their own homes, they could be led to believe that Labour's housing policy was irrelevant as well.

Although the housing stock in the city had greatly improved, it was still possible to point to unsolved problems, and to claim, as Labour did, that they could not be solved until a Labour administration was in control. Thus there still existed overcrowding, the problem of poor families, and many others who were unable to get decent rented accommodation. Moreover, the period had seen the development of a sustained critique by the leaders of the labour movement, to the housing policy of the Coalition, and the gradual emergence of an independent alternative, based on the need to extend the social services, plan the development of the city, and redress the balance of investment in housing in the interest of working people. Eventually, this policy, together with policies on other issues, won the Labour Party a majority on the Council. Unfortunately, the new administration

was only just beginning to make a mark at the time of the outbreak of war. For most of the period, Labour could only react to the policies of the Coalition which were aimed at winning over sections of working people in the 1930s. Although in the long run, given the emergence of Labour as a major political force at national and local level, it was inevitable that such a working class city as Coventry should get a Labour majority, the policies of the coalition could be significant in holding up this event, and in limiting the power of the new administration when elected.

FOOTNOTES

1. Trades Council Collection, Notes on the Annual Report of 1910.
2. Trades Council, Annual Report for 1920.
3. Coventry Standard, 6/7th January 1933.
4. Medical Officer of Health, Annual Report, 1929.
5. M.O.H. Annual Report, 1934.
6. M.O.H. Annual Report, 1921.
7. R.F. Prosser, Coventry: A Study in Urban Continuity, Birmingham M.A. Dissertation, 1955.
8. M.O.H. Annual Report, 1936.
9. " " " 1923.
10. " " " 1919-1931.
11. " " " 1930.
12. " " " 1920.
13. See Chapter Two.
14. MDT 25th November 1918.
15. MDT 30th December 1918.
16. " 23rd December 1918.
17. " 7th January 1919.
18. " 31st December 1918.
19. " 8th January 1919.
20. " 13th January 1919.
21. MDT 25th November, 16th December, 30th December 1918, 6th January, 8th January, 13th January, 15th February; these were all large meetings, and it was only after the inquiry in March that disagreements appeared among the tenants.
22. MDT 8th January 1919.
23. " 17th January 1919 and 15th February 1919.
24. " 22nd February 1919.

25. MDT 14th January 1919.
26. " 28th February 1919. The Town Clerk claimed that the tender of £165,816 by the company was no less than £72,000 lower than the nearest tender.
27. MDT 28th February 1919.
28. Housing Committee Minutes, 25th March 1919.
29. MDT 12th March 1919.
30. Housing Committee, Minutes, 29th April 1919.
31. MDT 15th March, 17th March, 18th March and 20th March,
32. Trades Council, Annual Report, 1920.
33. For more information on the Addison housing scheme, see Gilbert, op.cit, pp. 139-150.
34. The Housing (Financial Provisions) Act 1924, Report of the Town Clerk to the Housing Committee, p.10.
35. Housing Committee Minutes, 30th December 1919 and 27th January 1920.
36. Housing Committee, " 30th October 1923.
37. " " " 14th July 1920.
38. The Assisted Housing Scheme, Report of the Housing Committee, 18th July 1921.
39. The Housing (Financial Provisions) Act 1924, Report of the Town Clerk to the Housing Committee, 1924.
40. ibid, p.6.
41. Coventry Standard, 1st August 1924.
42. The Financial Aspects of the Housing (Financial Provisions) Act 1924, Report of the City Treasurer to the Housing Committee, 1924.
43. Coventry Standard, 27th February 1925.
44. Coventry Standard, 31st July 1925.
45. M.O.H. Annual Report 1928.
46. M.O.H. Annual Report 1930.
47. ibid.
48. Frederick Smith, Coventry, Six Hundred Years of Municipal Life. Coventry 1945, p.163.

49. M.O.H. Annual Report 1933.
50. M.O.H. The Health of the City in 1939, An Interim Report, 1939.
51. MDT 28th April 1932.
52. M.O.H. Annual Report, 1932.
53. M.O.H. Annual Reports, 1933-38.
54. H.W. Richardson and D.H. Aldcroft, Building in the British Economy Between The Wars, p.56, 1968. Coventry figures from M.O.H. Annual Reports.
55. Gilbert, op.cit, p.202. Coventry figures from the M.O.H. Annual Reports.
56. MDT 18th August 1936.
57. Richardson and Aldcroft, op.cit. p.56. Coventry figures from M.O.H. Annual Reports.
58. MDT 1st June 1937.
59. Coventry Permanent Economic Building Society, Annual Reports, 1915-1939.
60. ibid.
61. MDT 28th July 1937.
62. Coventry Standard, 3/4th February 1933.
63. MDT 1st June 1937.
64. Gilbert, op.cit, p.203.

CHAPTER NINE

The Unions in Recovery

From 1934 trade union membership began to revive, and a gradual recovery of union activity in the workshops took shape. This chapter examines the way the revival grew. Despite the partial revival of the forces of the left - the CP and Labour Party trade union militants - the new trade unionists showed different features from that of the early 1920s.

The employers had won the battle over craft union rights in the workplace. The unions had been slow to break out of the craft union mould, even when in isolation. As a result the new trade unionism, at least up to the outbreak of the Second World War, confined itself for the most part to issues concerned with piece-work and payment. Although trade unions extended their influence over women and young workers, there was no major clash over workshop controls and union rights. The gradual process of division from the Labour Party also helped to create a narrow range of action for unions than had been the case after the war. The unions had not yet recovered the confidence to make demands over issues involving control.

The chapter deals firstly with the extension of the car and aircraft industry, and the way the AEU in particular sought to use the new economic conditions to make gains over piece-work and the right to organise apprentices. It then covers the revival of membership in the particular unions, and some of the major disputes that helped this revival. Finally, it assesses the state of the unions prior to the Second World War.

I The Expansion of Engineering

In the autumn of 1929 the world recession in trade began, and the unemployment figures of the 1920s, which had looked bad enough, were overshadowed by the years of mass unemployment. The slump was at its worst in 1931/32, and full recovery did not take place until the second part of the decade. Coventry could not hope to avoid this "economic blizzard" but it was surprising how quickly it recovered. The motor industry and the aircraft industry did not feel the pinch until 1931, and recovery was well under way by 1934. Although unemployment was high between 1930 and 1933, it never reached the levels of the depressed areas or of the country as a whole.

In June 1930 Givens reported to the AEU DC that unemployment in Coventry had risen from 2,575 to 7,727 in the previous seven months. The union itself had 450 out of 3,078 members out of work.⁽¹⁾ This figure rose in the autumn due to the usual seasonal lay-offs, but fell in the autumn. In 1931 the situation was worse, and by the summer the union had over eight hundred members out of work.⁽²⁾ What was particularly annoying was that because Coventry was better off than most other cities, there were a number of press reports encouraging people to go there to find jobs. In August 1931 the AEU DC issued a statement:

"Coventry District Committee desire members to know that the articles booming the motor trade published in the press, stating that firms are unable to cope with orders are entirely misleading. So far as Coventry is concerned 25 per cent of our members are unemployed and in receipt of benefit instead of wages, the Employment Exchange figures being about 17,000 unemployed out of a total population of 170,000." ⁽³⁾

The position had improved only slightly by early 1932. Of the 2,760 members in the AEU in 1932, 88 were apprentices, 98 had left the

trade, 584 were unemployed, 47 were sick, and 168 retired, leaving only 1,775 paying members.⁽⁴⁾ However, although union membership declined for another two years, unemployment also fell off. Throughout 1932 there was a sustained recovery, particularly in the motor trade, and although there were over 10,000 out of work in the city in February 1933 this figure soon fell, and before long certain shortages of skilled labour began to show. 1934 was a good year for the motor industry. Orrell reported in May that

"Trade in Coventry is good at the moment, and from the point of view of organisation, it must be a very appropriate time for propaganda work, and we are hoping for good results from our efforts at this time." ⁽⁵⁾

By the summer of 1935 he was describing the state of trade as "decidedly good," while 1936 was described as "exceptionally prosperous."⁽⁶⁾ 1937 was also a good year while the two years before the war showed some fluctuation.

The relative prosperity of the motor trade allowed a number of companies to continue to increase rapidly in size. The Standard Motor Company was the city's success story. In 1930 it was producing 6,000 cars a year, and this increased to 50,000 a year by the end of the decade. The company had the land for expansion at Canley, and concentrated on small and medium size cars for the mass market.⁽⁷⁾ The two Rootes companies, Humber and Hillman, also prospered, and by 1937 the combined output of the two was 52,000 vehicles a year.⁽⁸⁾ By the end of the decade, Rootes and Standard were secure in their places as part of the "big six" British producers. Another success story was Swallow Motors, which moved into the city in 1928 and which changed its name to S.S. Motors in 1933, and later became the Jaguar Co. Thanks mainly to its close links with Standard, it grew from being a tiny outfit to become a major source of

quality cars in this decade. Lea-Francis, Alvis and Daimler all made progress as well.⁽⁹⁾

But just as a company could still make its fortune quickly in the motor trade, others could decline from a strong position to near ruin in a few years. In the 1930s, Singer, Riley, Triumph, and Rover all ran into trouble. In 1929 Singer was the third largest car producer in Britain, but it lacked the space to expand its Coventry base. It bought a factory in Birmingham that turned out to be a bad investment, and its sales fell quickly. In 1935 it pulled out of Coventry completely.⁽¹⁰⁾ Rover in 1929 had been the fourth largest car company, but had never been able to make consistently the sort of profits needed to stay in business. In the early 1930s its losses accumulated, and the company was unable to decide what sort of car it should concentrate on producing. 1931 saw the company on the edge of bankruptcy, and it only survived by undergoing a severe curtailment of its operations, including the closure of one of its factories in the city. Reorganisation in the following year saved the company, which was making good profits by 1934 and was strong enough to join the shadow factory scheme in 1937.⁽¹¹⁾ Triumph, however, had undergone expansion in 1930 but this had not helped the fortunes of the company, which declined throughout the decade. By 1939 the company only employed a few hundred workers, and was taken over by the Receiver.⁽¹²⁾ Riley underwent a similar decline, and only survived by being taken over by Rootes in 1938.⁽¹³⁾ Thus although the motor industry was expanding, it was still a dangerous business. One year's trading with a new model could completely turn the company round. Lay-offs in the summer months continued for all but the most successful concerns, though not on the same scale as the 1920s. The impact of lay-offs on the city was also reduced

by the expansion of the Armstrong-Whitworth factory in Whitley, the growth of the Peel-Connor telephone works in Stoke, and the expansion of Courtaulds in Foleshill, which was employing over 6,000 workers in the mid 1930s. The growth of the motor trade also saw a growth of motor accessory production, and the growth of the G.E.C. Company in the city. This owned Peel-Connor, and in the 1930s took over a number of other factories, including those once used by Rudge-Whitworth, Lea-Francis and Wickmans. The motor trade also stimulated the machine tool industry, though this industry did not prosper in the way that others did.

In 1936 the Government drew up plans to boost its rearmament programme, as it felt that Royal Ordnance factories were unable to meet the demand, particularly for aircraft. Seven shadow factories were set up with Government funds, in each case bringing firms, usually car firms, into the aircraft industry to run the factories. All of the factories were in the Midlands, and three were in Coventry, run by Rootes, Rover, and Standard. Armstrong-Whitworth, which was already a merger of a car company with an aircraft company, and which became Hawker-Siddeley Aircraft Co. in 1935 was encouraged to expand, and in the same year acquired land from the Corporation for a new factory at Baginton. Thus in the late 1930s a number of new, large factories appeared on the outskirts of the city, and more were added in 1939/40. One of the effects of this expansion was naturally to make Coventry an important target for German bombers in the war. Before the construction of the shadow factories, the Midlands was classified by the military authorities as an area vulnerable to enemy attack. Nevertheless, virtually all of the rearmament programme took place in the Midlands, while the local and national authorities took no corresponding steps to prepare air defence or for the

protection of civilians. The citizens of Coventry were to suffer for this neglect. The official historian of the Second World War commented that

"The large number of vital factories for aircraft production around London and in Birmingham and Coventry proved to be very undesirable concentrations of aircraft capacity." (14)

Later, in 1938, another group of factories was commissioned close to the first group. This was "contrary to all rules of vulnerability," but was felt to be unavoidable, as both management and labour needed to run the factories efficiently had to come from the motor industry.⁽¹⁵⁾

The growth of the motor industry and the effect of rearmament meant that from 1935 onward Coventry was a refuge for thousands from the distressed areas. In fact from 1935 up to the outbreak of war unemployment seldom fell below 3,000 in the city, but this amounted to only just over 3 per cent of the working population.⁽¹⁶⁾ Sometimes unemployment would fluctuate well above that figure, but given the volatility of the motor industry and the increasing stream of new arrivals into Coventry, it would appear that there was very little long term unemployment from 1935 onwards. It is not easy to estimate the extent of the migration to Coventry before the war, especially as there was no Census in 1941, and that large scale migration only developed in the 1930s from 1936 onwards. The estimated mid-year population for the city in 1936 shows an increase over the previous year of only just over 2,000 people. The increase in 1937 is over 14,000 and for 1938 is over 23,000. Thereafter it began to slow down.⁽¹⁷⁾ This migration must have had a profound effect on the social, cultural and economic life of the city, but this was only just beginning to make its presence felt at the outbreak of the war.

Although many of the migrants came from Wales and Scotland, and were often associated with the militancy of the unions in the mining industry, Coventry trade unionists were reluctant to see them as benefits to their organisation. Rather they preferred to think of them as dilutees. A report to the AEU DC, after a reduction in piece-work prices at the Rover had not been opposed in 1930, said

"Membership in shop very poor, very much cheap labour, including Welshmen from distressed areas, most of them have come to Coventry on their own initiative. Men like a lot of lambs and the Chargehands with no guts."
(18)

When the DC interviewed some chargehands, it was reported that "Welshmen had been introduced...." the implication being that cuts must follow.⁽¹⁹⁾

In 1933 when a sub-committee of the AEU met to consider the debt system at the Daimler, it was reported that "Machine men were cheap men, mostly from the country who would accept anything."⁽²⁾ In 1935, the DC heard from one of its members, Charlie Worrod, about the lack of organisation in the Humber Machine Tool Repair section:

"His experience of the past month had never been equalled in his 27 years membership. He was afraid of the men and not the masters, any semblance of unity was absent, except that the men were like a lot of paralysed rabbits. Most of them were new members...." (21)

At the same meeting, the DC resolved to "deprecate the importation of young persons to the city," as it meant breaking up families, exposing young people to moral danger, "as well as providing Employers with cheap labour unless they are compelled to pay wages sufficient to provide adequate maintenance." Norman Edwards, who worked at the Humber and who was one of the first stewards there in the 1930s, claimed that migrants from the mining areas showed little understanding of trade unions, and he and others claimed that the influx of Welsh and Scottish workers into the

Standard was the reason for the poor organisation there. (22)

Much of this may have been resentment of outsiders who failed to show proper respect for the natives, and there is some evidence of migrants playing an important role in some of the industrial disputes of the period - Sammy Kahn was arrested as one of the leaders of the apprentices strikes in 1937, and it was pointed out in court that he was newly arrived from Scotland. (23) Ernie Roberts, a young migrant, was sacked at Rootes shadow factory for union activity. However, there was certainly no immediate increase in militancy and trade unionism as a result of the migration, which included people from country areas as well as the distressed areas. One lament to the AEU DC stated that

"Dilution was rampant and that at Rootes Securities Ltd. (shadow factory) a butcher from Keniworth was working in his butchers smock. (24)

This was the language of the first world war complaints against the unskilled.

As the migration to the city was only on a large scale for the two years before the war, Scottish, Welsh and other groups had barely begun to establish their own particular contributions to the life of Coventry before the war broke out, and further study is needed to see their impact during the war itself.

E Young Workers and Piece-work.

The growth of the motor and associated industries, aircraft and rearmament clearly provided a strong basis for the reestablishment of the trade union movement in the main engineering workshops. Potential strength can be shown by the instance of Daimler management going to their newly recognised shop stewards in December 1936 and asking them to recruit five hundred machinists for the firm, something they found very difficult

to achieve.⁽²⁵⁾ The city was ready for a new wave of trade unionism.

In July 1934 the AEU DC had a long discussion on the problem concerning recruitment of new members. The discussion took place as the first signs of resurgence were beginning to show. Employment was much improved, and a number of union groups in workplaces had begun to appoint shop stewards. Nevertheless, organisation was still very weak, and the National Executive Committee had invited the DC to state the problems it encountered in recruitment. On behalf of the DC Givens wrote a long letter, which pointed out that potential membership was 25,000 while actual membership was 2,653, which represented an increase of 233 in 6 months. He then listed no fewer than ten reasons for the weakness. The first was the effect of the 1922 lockout, and the fact that there were 10,000 ex members in the workshops and only 2,000 members, and the influence of the ex members had predominated. The second reason was

"The youthful element in the shops have no conception of Trade Union influence in reducing hours and maintaining wages etc. and take the present hours and conditions for granted."

The third reason was the system of piece-work:

"The Employers wink at excessive piece-work earnings in order to hide low basic rates, this with overtime established a relatively high standard of living and unthinking content, applies to Coventry in a greater degree than any other centre."

Allied to this was the problem of accepting low rated workers into the union. The union believed that a machineman's rate should be 48/- a week, and men not getting that could not be accepted:

"A very large number of men have accepted 35/- plus piecework and depend upon their piecework earnings, but this prohibits admission to the Society."

Other problems included the concessions made by the union at national

level which "created the impression that we are defeated and also removed the old local feeling of responsibility for conditions," the National Insurance Acts taking the administration of state benefits from the hands of the unions, and the reductions in the level of union benefits, the attack on shop stewards, the high contributions for new members, and the precarious position of local officials' salaries. The DC approved the latter, and also wanted to push for more protection to be given to shop stewards, and for union rules to make it easier for ex-members to rejoin. (26)

Of particular importance were the problems associated with young workers and piece-work. The progress made by the unions over the next five years was crucial to the revival of trade union organisation in the city.

With young workers the unions tried to make a distinction between boys, youths, and apprentices, while the Engineering Employers Association distinguished between unskilled boys, boys getting training which would eventually lead to craftsman status, and boys who were apprentices, either by verbal agreement or through indentures. (27) The different interpretations were of some importance for there was a general understanding to limit the number of apprentices to a maximum of three to ten adult skilled men. The unions saw this agreement as restricting the number of boys. The employers saw it as covering only apprentices, and only relating to skilled tradesmen. As the large majority of boys were not apprentices this gave the employers scope for action.

There were three reasons why employers should see the spread of the use of boys as important. The first one was that they were entirely outside the scope of union control. Thus Varley, CDEEA secretary, commented in 1929,

"The attitude of this Association has been consistent throughout in refusing to allow the Trade Unions to be recognised as a medium of negotiation in respect of either

1. Indentured Apprentices, boys and youths, or
2. Non-indentured Apprentices, boys and youths." (28)

This was not strictly true, as both before and after the war the unions had met the employers in local conferences over apprentices and their pay. Although the employers had given little away, the policy of refusing to discuss the issue dates from the employers' offensive prior to the managerial functions dispute, and had been accepted by the unions after that dispute. There had been a local conference between the Association and the AEU in 1930, but this had been purely concerned with definitions of apprentices, for the general agreement on the ratio of apprentices to craftsmen carried on. On all other matters, the employers had full control. This meant an increasingly large proportion of the workforce had been taken out of the arena of collective bargaining.

The second reason for preferring young workers was their cheapness, this was particularly the case in the 1930s. Young workers were not expected to get a man's rate until the age of 21 or 22, and they could then be discharged. Union pressure in the 1930s managed to put a few shillings on the basic rate for all engineering workers, but as there were no negotiations over apprentices' and boys' pay, they gradually fell further behind the men, as the new increases were not passed on to them. Boys kept the rates down, reduced labour costs, and took away the bargaining power of skilled workers; they were instruments of dilution. As such they were sometimes welcomed by workers as well as management. Alfred Herbert's, despite or because of, its reputation for paternalism, was notorious for the excessive use of boys and young workers instead of men.

Where gang work existed in the factory it could work to the benefit of the men left. A typical gang would contain a chargehand, a couple of skilled men, and half a dozen boys. The chargehand would try to negotiate a rate for the gang as if they were all men, and if he was successful this would lead to the boys getting the boys' rate, and the men sharing out the extra amongst themselves.⁽²⁹⁾ Such habits made it difficult for unions to fight for a higher rate. In January 1931 Francis of NUVB complained of:

"A marked tendency on the part of some members to accept reduced piecework prices and then to attempt to eke out a decent 'pick-up' by accepting juvenile labour. This sort of thing should be strongly objected to. Prices ought to be based on adult labour and not at a point at which they can only be made to pay by the help of cheap juvenile labour." (30)

The third reason was the need to develop a first line of management from aspiring apprentices. Varley wrote in 1928:

"The purpose of the employer towards the apprentice is to encourage the development of those boys who have the ability to acquire that greater knowledge of their work, and of other work to which it is related, which will enable them, in due course, to act in a supervisory capacity if required to do so. It is therefore to be understood that the employers will take, departmentally, whatever steps he considers necessary to the operational training of all his young employees but will give, officially, his apprentices facilities for a wider training so as to provide a class of men from whom to draw for use in wider spheres of work when vacancies occur." (31)

Just as the attitude of foremen and management to the unions was important to the employers, it was necessary to keep the potential foremen away from union influence.

Employers were helped in their exploitation of young workers not only by some of the men, but by the attitudes of the young workers themselves. After the collapse of trade unionism in the early 1920s these

workers would have had no contact with the abstract and confusing world of unions, and with money in their pockets saw no reason to complain. Instead it was the union that complained. On a recruitment visit to Coventry in 1930, Charles Lamb, AEU National Organiser warned,

"This overtime and payments by results era, blinding as it does the importance of recognising and holding out for a district rate, is producing among the youths of the industry an indifferent type of individual. Shallow, they do not see the need that exists for union membership, and perhaps have few convictions about anything. They are treated harshly by employers insofar as they are bribed by comparatively high earnings, then when at dawn of manhood and requiring a subsistence wage, they are turned off and eventually become a menace to themselves and their fellows in the industry." (32)

This was somewhat unfair, as the district rate was not important any more, and the union handicapped itself by insisting on its importance after its relevance had largely disappeared.

There were good reasons, then, for the spreading use of boys, either as apprentices or not, and the minutes of the EC of the CDEEA recorded in August 1923

"that general satisfaction was expressed at the efforts which were apparently being made to introduce quietly and unostentatiously indentured labour into the coach building trade." (33)

While the Association saw some restriction on the use of apprentices, it saw none on the use of boys generally, and also pointed out to unions and others, that

"The vast majority of boys employed by members of this Association are engaged on mere repetition work, and cannot be considered as receiving a probationary training." (34)

This was bound to produce the problems referred to by Lamb and by the educational authorities, (Chapter Seven), but the Association refused to accept any direct responsibility:

"It was agreed, however, that the predicament of youths who emerged at the age of 21 years without any particular training was not the concern of industry but rather that the question is one which has a wider application and might come within the purview of the local Employment Committee."

(35)

At this committee, however, employers' representatives showed their main interest was in ensuring a fresh supply of new young labour, and in 1936 Givens reported to the AEU DC that after a three year long fight, Employers had got the Director of Education to find boys from distressed areas who could be brought to work in Coventry. (36)

The only union that held out against an excessive number of apprentices and boys was the Birmingham Sheet Metal Workers Society, which had always put a great degree of importance on controlling entry into the skilled trades that it covered. Up to 1921 it tolerated no apprentices at all, and even in 1924, after the lock-out, it was only prepared to offer a proportion of one apprentice to every 25 members, while the employers were trying to establish the normal proportion of three to ten. (37)

Throughout the late 1920s and the 1930s the employers tried to increase the number of apprentices, but with only limited success. Gradually the union accepted a few apprentices, but in 1934 Baston, the local official, was complaining about the excessive number of apprentices in one shop where the ration was one to eight, so clearly the employers were not able to make much progress. (38)

In the 1930s however, the Sheet Metal Workers Society was the only strong union in Coventry, and in this as in other things they were quite exceptional when compared to the other unions. It is interesting to note that while all the unions criticised the number of untrained boys in the shops, they were forced by employers' actions to oppose the same boys when they became indentured apprentices.

As trade union membership recovered, more attention was paid to getting recognition for young workers, and the pay increases that they missed eventually provoked resistance. But it was a slow business; at the beginning of 1936 the AEU had 150 members in section four, which was its apprentices' section.⁽³⁹⁾ During that year a Young Members Fellowship was set up, but at the end of the year there were only about 400 union apprentices, while there must have been over 1,500 indentured apprentices in the city, and thousands of young workers.⁽⁴⁰⁾

The breakthrough took place in more organised cities. In March 1937 apprentices and others on the Clyde came out on strike for union recognition, and the strike spread to other centres. In Glasgow 30,000 adult workers went on strike for a day in sympathy. There is no record of any industrial action at this time in Coventry, but events elsewhere certainly stimulated an apprentices' movement in the city. In early April a deputation of apprentices from Armstrong-Whitworth went to the AEU DC and complained at not having got the recent pay increases, and that as they were often being used to train unskilled men who were getting 3 to 4 times their wages, there was widespread discontent. Shortly afterwards a young union workers' committee was set up at the plant, with DC blessing, to press jointly with the stewards committee for recognition, but the management refused to recognise it.⁽⁴¹⁾ At the end of the month, a meeting of apprentices from a number of workshops set up a committee, and called on the DC to arrange a local conference to secure a wage increase, a restriction on overtime and its abolition for boys under 18, and abolition of week-end work, and the full rate at 21.⁽⁴²⁾

The Transport and General Workers Union, which was recruiting unskilled and semi-skilled workers in engineering offered to hold a joint

local conference with the AEU over apprentices, but this was turned down, as the AEU was not prepared to accept that the TGWU had any right to cover apprentices.⁽⁴³⁾ The local conference took place at the end of May, but saw no progress, with the employers refusing to recognise the union's right to raise the issue. The AEU DC instructed Givens to write to the Executive Council, to

"draw attention to the arrogant attitude of the Employers and point out that there is a very strong probability of action being taken in this District, and asking that the EC should support any such action by the youths." (44)

During the summer of 1937, considerable propaganda was carried on among young workers, with the Trades Council, Labour League of Youth, and the Communist Party taking the issue up. In September another local conference heard the union's complaints over young workers, and employers denied that they had been deliberately increasing the number of boys in the shops, pointing out that they could not find men. No progress was made on recognition.⁽⁴⁵⁾

This turned out to have been the employers' last chance, for on 27th September the young workers' strike began with a walk-out at Armstrong-Whitworth, at the Baginton factory, and quickly spread to the other factories in the group at Whitley and Smith Street. The lads had asked for 3/- a week to be put on to the young workers rates, and for the union to be recognised.⁽⁴⁶⁾ On 28th Varley claimed in the press that the strike was quite unconstitutional, and that there was no question of negotiation until there had been a return to work. He also claimed that the young workers were on payment by results that was giving them on average £2.10s a week.⁽⁴⁷⁾ The next day several hundred of the strikers held a march, and meeting, at which Givens estimated that there were 600 out. The boys

had their own committee, and they claimed 1,000 were out. Givens also attacked Varley, claiming that the strikers were not unconstitutional:

"There is no constitution for these boys to break. The employers have refused to set up a constitution for the conditions of labour for these young workers, and that is one of the big things they are claiming - the right of the Union to negotiate on conditions and wages for themthey are being exploited for gain and their future in industry in the matter of proper training is not being safeguarded." (48)

However, he also made clear that dissatisfaction over pay had been the main reason for the strike. The boys had been asking for an increase since June, and had given 27th September at a deadline. They struck shortly after the deadline expired, and got an offer from management on the same afternoon, (probably before Varley intervened), but the offer was not acceptable and the strike went on.

On the fourth day of the strike it began to spread, but initially only within the same company, in this case Armstrong-Siddeley. The employers there denied it was in sympathy with the strikers at Armstrong-Whitworth, and that it was also due to a breakdown in negotiations.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Varley ensured that the strike remained much in the public eye by launching an attack on the AEU in the press, claiming that its interference was entirely to blame:

"The boys themselves, if left alone, are perfectly happy, being in receipt of wages in excess of any other engineering centre in the country, coupled with working conditions and prospects second to none in the United Kingdom." (50)

There was some truth in Varley's reference to high pay, for on the day the strike began the local Association reviewed the comparative rates of pay for engineering workers across the country, and had finished by deciding that Coventry employers should be "severely criticised," for the high wages they paid.⁽⁵¹⁾ But Varley was wrong to attribute the strike to

the AEU. Although the DC supported the stoppage, it had taken little initiative over the whole question of organising boys and apprentices, and had played no part in the authorisation of the strike. This was an important point, for if Varley had allowed the Armstrong-Whitworth and Armstrong-Siddeley management to increase their offers, the strike probably would have ended. However, he saw it as a major challenge by the union to the Employers' Association, and responded accordingly. The result was that both sides saw it from then on as about the principle for recognition rather than pay increases.

Givens replied to Varley the next day, again through the press, claiming that the strike was "a case of spontaneous combustion, due to the attitude of Mr. Varley, the employers and their foremen."⁽⁵²⁾ On the same day, 1st October, there was a walk-out of boys at Herberts, followed by dire threats from the management. They joined the boys from the Daimler shadow factory, and others who all over the city were meeting, seeing their management, and if failing to get recognition and an increase, walking out en masse. However, the fact that there was no action for several days after the Armstrong-Whitworth walk-out suggests that this movement was indeed spontaneous. Givens reported to the DC that he had been overwhelmed by hundreds of strikers, and had with difficulty got them to form Strike, Finance and Social Committees.⁽⁵³⁾ In some places the young workers were fully supported by the men. At Armstrong-Whitworth, for example, there was a sit-in in support of the boys, and all of the workers there were levied to provide financial backing.⁽⁵⁴⁾ In other places, the adults gave little support. When the boys walked out at B.T.H. Givens had to intervene to stop the men from doing the boys' work. This provoked a crisis with the Stewards Committee there, which felt that the DC was trying

to get them all laid off, and also blaming them for not supporting the boys. They offered their resignation en masse but the affair was eventually smoothed over. (55)

For the next few days the strike appeared to grow, though its full extent can only be guessed at. At its peak there were several thousand boys and youths out, and as an extraordinary coincidence, it took place at the same time as a mass strike of Courtaulds workers, also demanding recognition. The majority of these workers were young girls, so for a few days it must have seemed like a general youth strike in the city. It was clear that the years of retreat for the unions were over, and that a new generation of trade unionists was emerging. For most of the strikers in the engineering industry this was their first taste of trade unionism, for the AEU only had about 400 young members before the strike. At some concerns the boys came out on strike when even the men were all ununionised. The inexperienced strikers showed much enthusiasm. There were daily meetings in the Market Place, and mass picketing of Herberts and elsewhere. Sam Kahn, one of the leaders of the strike, was arrested at a mass picket. The boys sent speakers to Rugby, and delegates to a conference called by striking youths in Manchester and Glasgow, to try to co-ordinate countrywide activity. The DC were informed of this, but appear to have had no say as to whether they should go or not. (56)

On the 10th October the AEU DC got a telegram telling it that the EEF had agreed to reopen negotiations at national level on the right of the unions to represent apprentices. Immediately the DC resolved

"That this DC refuse to consider any suggestion of requesting the boys to go back to work until such time as the Coventry Employers also give us the right to negotiate on behalf of the boys." (57)

However, by 14th October it was clear that recognition was likely to be given, and the DC recommended at an aggregate meeting that there be a return to work on the 18th. A motion that "the boys remain out until the whole of their demands are satisfied" got only 12 votes out of the 500-600 members present, and the resolution to return to work was "enthusiastically carried."⁽⁵⁸⁾ By the time the boys returned, a National Conference had agreed in principle to give union rights to apprentices, and to increase wages. The strike had lasted some three weeks, and by its finish the President of the Employers Association had completely changed his attitude, as he described recognition as "very gratifying."⁽⁵⁹⁾ Although the employers had resisted for decades the right of unions to negotiate on this issue, they preferred union recognition to having to deal directly with young workers, and it was clear to them that the strikers were not completely under the control of the unions. A ballot of the local employers over whether they supported implementation of the National Agreement or not found a majority in favour of 30 to 2.⁽⁶⁰⁾

While the local employers were quickly learning to live with the new agreement on boys and apprentices, disillusion was also quickly setting in on the union side. The national agreement established a special procedure for young workers; if they had a grievance they could raise it with the local district organiser or district secretary, who would take it to Varley. If there was no satisfaction the issue could go to local or national conferences. The shop stewards, however, were not included in the agreement, and in theory, could not raise issues domestically. Moreover, indentured apprentices were outside the scope of the agreement, and were still not covered by union negotiations, though there was an agreement to see that their terms and conditions did not fall behind other workers.

In practice, shop stewards made attempts to cover boys and apprentices, though it is not clear with how much success. In December the AEU DC resolved,

"In the opinion of this D.C. the Agreement recommended in regard to Young Workers is entirely useless as at present drafted, and we demand that the provisions for avoiding dispute and Shop Stewards Agreement shall be applied to the whole of the Male Workers in Federated Establishments." (61)

It called for a ballot before a final agreement was reached, and called a local meeting of young workers, both members and non-members of the union to agitate for something stronger. In the event, the meeting was not successful, as the minute admitted that it was poorly attended - the young workers had received more money than they had originally struck for, and were content with the position.⁽⁶²⁾ This concentration on money rather than union rights is confirmed by AEU Section IV membership figures.

Although there were more than two thousand boys on strike for several weeks in the autumn of 1937, the membership figures given for the beginning of 1938 was 897.⁽⁶³⁾ The next year they went over a thousand, but the majority of those on strike appear to have been not members of any union. The Transport and General Workers Union appears to have made only limited progress in engineering before the war, and although some of the boys would undoubtedly have belonged to it, membership amongst boys would have been a lot less than the AEU membership. The strike was an important breakthrough in terms of reestablishing the status of the unions, but unions had to wait for years before establishing, in national agreements at any rate, the right of shop stewards to negotiate for young workers. The strike and its outcome was the first step in the campaign, but because it was the first step, and a highly public one at that, it marked a significant revival in the fortunes of the unions, and the AEU in particular.

The second reason given by Givens for weak union organisation was the prevalence of piece-work and the problems connected with it. This was to some extent a problem imposed by the union on itself. The AEU DC decided that the rate for a member of the union was 48/-, exclusive of the 10/- war bonus, and that anyone not earning this was ineligible for membership. This might have made sense for skilled workers, but there were thousands of machine workers who were potential members but who were potential members but were rated well below this level. To make the situation worse, the actual earnings of these workers because they were on piece-work would be well in excess of 48/-. Nevertheless, in May 1935 the DC reaffirmed its position. It would accept labourers on a lower rate (but in fact set a rate no labourer was likely to get) but would not accept any machinest on less than 48/-.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Within two months the impossibility of this position was demonstrated. Givens, in taking up the issue of workers running into debt at the Daimler, had addressed a large meeting of Daimler workers, and as a result had received nearly 300 applications to join the union, many of them coming from machinists on low rates. In theory these applications should have been rejected, but the DC, no doubt mesmerised by the large number of them, agreed to admit them on probationary membership for three months in the hope that they would be able to obtain higher rates.⁽⁶⁵⁾

This was clearly an unsatisfactory position, and it was made worse for the AEU in that workers were at last seeking unions to join, and the Transport and General Workers Union did not have such restrictions. A secret meeting of the AEU DC heard that the machine rate for the TGWU was 35/6, and so it was agreed to reduce the minimum rate for machinists from 48/- to 38/3, rising to 40/6 for men with two years experience.⁽⁶⁶⁾ This

reduction was combined with a further attempt to establish a higher rate with the local Employers' Association. However, a local conference on the issue saw the employers refuse to budge from the rate of 35/6, the TGWU rate. The DC resolved to take the issue to Central Conference, "in order to clear the way for action" but with earnings running at such a high rate it must have known that this was unlikely to get anywhere.⁽⁶⁷⁾

The Coventry stand on district rates disturbed the EC of the union. In March 1936 the EC member for the area and a national official came to a DC meeting and urged it to relax its rules as this would enable it to recruit many more and win increases based on collective strength, and also keep the TGWU out of engineering.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Several further meetings on the subject took place, and it was clear that there was still a reluctance to accept a lowering of the rates. At a final meeting in March 1936 it was moved that no one below the rate be accepted as long as there were men on the rate who had not been recruited. This was rejected, and a resolution was carried that stated that no person be admitted who was below the rate from a shop where it was possible to get the rate without a special approval from the DC. In special circumstances, where a large number applied who were all getting below the rate, then they would be accepted if they would support an attempt by the DC to establish the rate there.⁽⁶⁹⁾ This meant that where Givens got, as he recently had done, 70 proposals of membership from one shop where they were all below the recognised rate, he could now accept them into membership, albeit in theory with strings attached.⁽⁷⁰⁾ As from March 1936 the issue was not raised again at the DC so it is likely that Givens was tacitly allowed to take in a large number of men below the rate. AEU membership figures in Coventry show a significant change from 1936 onwards, as the number of new members increased considerably. In

the twelve months between March 1935 and March 1936 membership went up by just under a thousand while in the next twelve months membership went up by more than two thousand seven hundred.⁽⁷¹⁾

It is likely that the only real reason why the AEU made the concessions it did was the threat from the TGWU, which was beginning to make progress in the shops. Even with this stimulus, the AEU did not succeed before the war in recruiting the 25,000 members that it felt could be reached. At the end of 1939 membership was above 13,000, very similar to what it had been at the time the AEU was established.⁽⁷²⁾ Of course there were many more engineering workers in the city in 1939, and it is very probable that the membership of the TGWU was well below the level of the WU in 1920; indeed it probably had only a few thousand members in engineering at the most. The effective level of union membership in the city at the outbreak of the war was therefore well below the peak after the first war.

The reason why the AEU DC made difficulties about low-rated workers joining the union was its deepseated distrust of piece-work. Yet by the 1930s piece-work had been well established in the city for decades. Moreover, the alternative to piece-work that was put forward, the high basic rate, would certainly have led to a large fall in real earnings if it had been put into practice. There was no doubt that the piece-work system did create instability and insecurity of earnings, and also created further problems for those who were not part of the system. It was also used by employers to stop the spread of trade unionism. But the inability of the DC to come to terms with it also amounted to a barrier to unionisation. The rhetoric against piece-work combined with the existing and long standing practice of insisting on the district rate meant that the DC found itself

discouraging trade union membership after decades of worrying about the lack of membership. When the position looked like being a serious obstacle to unionisation the DC backed down, but the problem showed that in the 1920s the DC had become isolated from the workshops, and found it difficult when re-establishing links with them again to accept that times had changed. The DC had remained fairly stable in composition for many years. It had got older and felt further away from "the younger element," it was difficult for it to accept that young workers were not concerned at revenging the defeat of 1922 or with any of the procedural issues that were of importance to the union. The new generation of trade unionists had little interest in and less knowledge of the ideology of the older trade unionists. This lack of interest extended to union involvement in the Labour Party.

In theory, piece-work earnings were linked to the basic day rates, and allowed to rise over them on average by a certain amount. In 1931 the recognised average was $33\frac{1}{3}$ per cent above the day rates, and in the summer of that year this was reduced to 25 per cent. Although unions were weak at that time, there was some protest action, particularly at Armstrong-Whitworth, where NUVB members went on strike. The company secured a return to work when it issued the following notice:

"That while recognising that the new basis for piece prices is 25% the firm declare that it is not their intention to fix piece prices to yield only that figure, but that they will give a liberal interpretation in fixing piece prices in the future." (73)

Here was a state of affairs that worried both the employers and the unions. Formal cuts in earnings could be made up comparatively quickly. The cut to 25 per cent made an actual reduction in earnings in Coventry of only 4.7 per cent, lower than in other engineering centres. (74) The expanding

motor industry and the aircraft industry created the conditions for wage drift. For the unions, the ability of workers to increase their earnings through individual or group effort allied to bargaining over prices took away the urgency from the need to combat reductions or fight for increases. Another problem arising from the spread of piece-work was the position of workers who were not on it. These were for the most part unskilled labourers and the highly skilled maintenance men and toolroom workers. It was easier to give payments in lieu to unskilled workers, but both the employers and the unions found the problem of the toolroom workers highly complex. The origin of the problem was straightforward, and was expressed by the Employers' Association:

"It was agreed by all present that the root of the trouble under this head was the fact that semi-skilled and unskilled machinists engaged on payment by results, were often times in receipt of wages comparable or greater than the skilled Tool Room worker." (75)

In the eyes of the Association, a toolroom worker was one who was a fully skilled journeyman engaged for not less than 2 years on non-repetition precision tool work. Where possible, it was Association policy to devise a system of piece-work that would cover toolroom workers as well as the machine workers, and in October 1936 it was pointed out that a number of firms, including Armstrong-Whitworth, B.T.H., Alfred Herbert and Standard had their toolroom workers on piece-work.⁽⁷⁶⁾ These firms were in a minority however, and the problem for the employers was how to compensate the majority on time rates. It was not possible to agree to a general increase in rates, as this was a national matter and was not acceptable to the EEF. A position of no general rate was also not acceptable, as by 1935/6 there was a shortage of toolroom workers, and the firms were outbidding each other to get them. The union was concerned to establish basic rate for the district, and failing that to tackle each firm at a time.

In December 1933 the AEU at a local conference asked for an increase in the guaranteed earnings of toolroom workers, pointing out only 48/- a week of their earnings were secure, the rest being war bonus and in addition any possible variation in lieu of rates, merit rates, output bonus or commission. The employers refused to grant an increase on the basic rate, but agreed to consider some sort of allowance.⁽⁷⁷⁾

In April 1934 the Association decided that where it was not possible to get these workers onto piece-work then they should be paid a lieu rate of 25 per cent (i.e. 12/) plus the war bonus plus some form of merit payment.⁽⁷⁸⁾ However, in June 1934 at another local conference the AEU demanded 2/- an hour total payment. At the time the Association felt that the average payment was 1/8d per hour.⁽⁷⁹⁾ The Association applied to the EEF to get permission to pay a lieu rate, but this was rejected for fear of consequences elsewhere. Nevertheless the local Association, referring to the "vital importance" of the need for its members to act together, decided to informally introduce a lieu rate, but not until after the local conference when it would formally reject such a scheme!⁽⁸⁰⁾

The conference with the AEU ended in near farce, for after pressure from the union, Varley instructed the shorthand writer to leave the room, and then informally offered the 25 per cent lieu rate. When asked if he would put it in writing, he sent a letter to the union ODD saying the contents were strictly personal, and not for publication to any member of the union!⁽⁸¹⁾ The offer was rejected by the union, which was concerned to get an increase on the 48/-, and a guaranteed pay of 2/- an hour. At this time the union appears to have overplayed its hand. In 1934 recovery in union membership was only just getting under way, and there was no sign from toolroom workers that they would back up such a demand. The

application went to Central Conference, where there was a failure to agree, and the DC had to decide what further steps needed to be taken. After two meetings, it was decided to water down the claim to one of 1/9d an hour.⁽⁸²⁾ At a meeting of toolroom workers, the original 2/- claim was discussed, and dropped instead for a decision to call a ballot for industrial action over the 1/9d.⁽⁸³⁾ This, however, was rejected by the Executive Council of the union due to the poor organisation in the city and the fact that national talks were under way. Another meeting of toolroom workers decided instead to press for the gradual acceptance in the city of 1/9d as the minimum rate and asked the DC that

"intensive organisation should be proceeded with so that we should be strong enough to put this into effect, as without that organisation, it would not be possible to carry out this decision." ⁽⁸⁴⁾

This was an admittance that the union simply was not strong enough to take the employers on.

Although the matter was not formally taken up by either party for a couple of years, the lieu rate practice spread, and this slowly increased. In September 1936 the employers conceded an increase which they claimed brought the average earnings of toolroom workers up to 91/0³/₄d.⁽⁸⁵⁾ This still did not satisfy the AEU, and early in 1937 it again began agitating for an increase on the basic rate. Again no progress was made at local or central conference, and this time a ballot for industrial action was taken. The result must have disappointed the DC, for although there was a small majority in favour, the number voting was low. There were 165 for action and 159 against, and so industrial action was ruled out, and the DC carried on a local campaign.⁽⁸⁶⁾ From

1936 onward, the employers had taken monthly surveys of rates of pay for toolroom workers, heavily shrouded in secrecy. The survey showed the firms by a numbering system, not by name. The information was restricted to members of the Executive Committee of the Association, and copies of the survey were not allowed out of the meeting room.⁽⁸⁷⁾ The Association was still concerned with the problem of competition for toolroom workers, and poaching by one member firm from another.⁽⁸⁸⁾ This regular monthly survey contained the germ of the idea from the Tool Room agreement, which was not signed until 1941 when the wartime conditions allowed the union to push a much stronger case.

One less important problem that unions encountered in reorganising was another effect of piece-work, the system of carrying on debts to the company. A worker would agree to a price for a particular job, and then get on with it. He would be credited with having done the job in the time agreed. If, however, the job took longer than expected, or if there were delays over materials or tools, then the worker would not be entitled to what he had been credited. He might be able to make it up on another job, but this could not be taken for granted. In many places debts were settled at the end of a day or week, and the worker at least knew that he would get the time rate for that week. It was generally agreed that workers must expect to get some bad jobs as well as good paying jobs which would compensate. However, if the debt were carried on for longer than a week, it could be used to take money away from the worker when he had a good job. In other words he paid every penny of the debt, whereas if it were calculated on a daily or weekly basis, he may not have to do this, as this might reduce his earnings below the guaranteed time rate. The debt system therefore meant insecurity and could be a potent weapon

for controlling workers. It was particularly prevalent at the Daimler, and was responsible for the poor organisation and lack of militancy there. On one occasion a group of workers there complained to their M.P. about the position. Orrell, the AEU O.D. complained bitterly about this:

"Evidence was submitted that quite a number of workers are working piecework for day wages and at the same time incurring a debt. Instead of being in a trade union and bringing their grievances to the proper quarters, some of them wrote to the Member of Parliament for the city, asking for his help in the matter. One could hardly expect to find men so stupid and foolish in these times." (89)

Only in 1935 was the union able to improve organisation at the Daimler.

At a local conference the Employers' Association declared

"The carrying forward of debit balances is an integral part of the piecework system and is generally recognised throughout the engineering trade of this city. This position has been recognised by all the Trade Unions (including the AEU)." (90)

The AEU denied that it had ever accepted the position, as it had taken the matter to Central Conference some thirteen years earlier. After the 1935 conference, which ended with Daimler promising to provide more information, the AEU called a big meeting at Daimler, enrolled hundreds of workers, and set up a shop stewards system. Within a fortnight there were over thirty shop stewards operating in the factory.⁽⁹¹⁾ In a much stronger position, the union went back to a works conference, and got a promise from the firm to make improvements in the way the system worked.⁽⁹²⁾ This seemed to lead to an end of most abuses, but it took further negotiations which were not completed until January 1938 when the Employers' Association agreed with the AEU that normally debit balances would be settled within a week.⁽⁹³⁾ Even then, the agreement was limited to the AEU, and led to the TGWU taking the matter up with the employers

over their own members, which shows that the practice still existed. (94)

However, by the outbreak of war the practice was clearly on the way out, while the Daimler factory and its shadow factory soon became one of the best organised places in the city.

III The Union Revival

The revival of trade unionism was associated with substantial progress on the problems of young workers and of piece-work. In another important area of workshop life, however - that of safety, health and welfare policy - little change occurred before the Second World War. As most of the big factories were fairly modern, working conditions generally were regarded as being satisfactory, though there is no evidence about the level of accidents or the extent of ill-health. Although local employers claimed that they followed an enlightened policy on working conditions, they took exception to outside agencies such as the Factory Inspectorate attempting to intervene in the workshops. Thus when in 1931 the Factory Inspector asked Varley for copies of the Quarterly Accident Returns of associated companies, Varley refused on the grounds that they were confidential, and when he found that some companies were giving their own figures, he made them stop. He claimed

"If the figures were to be used simply as figures there would be no objection but if H.M. Inspector was intending to use the Returns with the object of harassing those firms whose figures were unsatisfactory he thought the figures should be kept confidential." (95)

Clearly, not all of the companies were following a safety-conscious policy.

On another occasion, the Factory Inspectorate prosecuted the Humber

Company for the employment of girls and women at weekends outside the legal hours. The breach, which was proven, was caused by the rush of work prior to the Motor Show. The Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Employers' Association record

"A nominal fine had been imposed and the Mayor had indicated very forcibly that he regarded the prosecution as vexatious." (96)

This attitude was endorsed by the Committee, though not surprisingly it produced a reaction from the AEU DC, as this sort of breach was widespread. There is no record of further prosecutions being brought.

A further example of the employers' sensitivity to health at work occurred in 1935, when W. Shepherd from Herbert's reported to the Employers' Association that his company was

"Exceedingly perturbed at the attitude which is being taken by local Panel Doctors in cases of sickness occurring to workers engaged on ordinary operations on grinding machines." (97)

Some of the doctors had been telling workers that grinding was "dangerous and conducive to Tuberculosis." Varley was instructed to take the matter up with the local health insurance committee to put it "in a proper perspective." No further complaints were heard, so Varley may have been successful. In fact, exposure to dust from a grindstone can lead to pneumoconiosis, and the Grinding of Metals Regulations of 1925 made it absolutely necessary for employers to fit adequate exhaust ventilation to grinding machines.

Another health matter that involved employers was the provision of tea or refreshment breaks during the working day. There was no legal requirement to provide these, and the local engineering companies were therefore reluctant to do so. In 1923, Factory Inspectors and medical

advisors went to the Standard and Coventry Chain, and asked the employers to provide breaks in the morning and afternoon. Again, the Employers' Association resented outside interference, and it was agreed that,

"The satisfactory working of any such system in our factories is impracticable, and furthermore that such 'pauses' are invariably abused by the workpeople, the result being consequent disorganisation in the various shops." (98)

Throughout this period the employers tried to withhold formal breaks, but during the 1930s it became customary to allow workers to take refreshment without having a formal right to leave the job.

A final example of the lack of resources given by employers to health matters occurred in 1936 when the local authority was beginning to consider the implications of the concentration of important engineering factories in Coventry in the light of possible enemy air attack. The Medical Officer of Health asked the Employers' Association if works' ambulances could be made available for general work in the city in an emergency. Enquiries revealed that twenty firms had only 49 trained ambulance men, and many of these doubled as firemen, together with only 18 fully qualified nurses.⁽⁹⁹⁾ It was therefore agreed that they had no spare capacity for general use, and that in the event of an emergency there would be more than enough for them to do in the factories.

The general impression given is that health and safety was a neglected issue in the workshops in this period; neglected by both the unions and the employers. The only time the employers showed great interest in working conditions was when they felt threatened or challenged by outside interests. Working conditions was an issue that was seen to be the exclusive domain of the employer.

Despite all the problems associated with excessive piece-work and

lack of union feeling, once the drive to get workers into the unions really got under way, progress was quick and permanent. The first breakthrough occurred at Riley Motors, in February 1934. New management were introducing a number of changes, and some workers were sacked while others were moved around. Co-incidentally, two leading Communists, Stokes and Harbourne, were working there, and they saw the opportunity to organise a shop meeting addressed by Givens. Two hundred people turned up to "the best meeting we have held for years," and 11 shop stewards were elected, including Stokes and Harbourne.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ Within a fortnight both had been elected to the AEU DC, as shop stewards' representatives, which gives some idea of the number of active stewards that existed in the city at the time!⁽¹⁰¹⁾ The stewards were able to get recognition, and obtained improvements in rates and other matters. In July 1934 a meeting of workers at Riley together with two subsidiaries of the main company attracted four hundred workers, and more stewards were elected.⁽¹⁰²⁾ As Riley was one of the smaller motor companies, the number of workers who actually joined the union was not large. Nevertheless, the events there were of crucial significance. In the first place they brought in new members just at the time when membership was at its very lowest level, that is, 2,415 in February 1934. (It had been within 5 of that figure for the last five months).⁽¹⁰³⁾ Had membership not picked up then undoubtedly the DC would have dispensed with Givens' services, at least as a full-time secretary because of the expense. The Riley revival saw the beginning of a gradual trickle in of new members from elsewhere as well. By the end of the year membership was 2,760, a very modest increase, but representing the turn of the tide after fourteen years of decline.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ Secondly, it brought two Communists, and in particular, Stokes, back on to the DC. This revival in Stokes' fortunes came after the appeals

procedure in the union had prevented his expulsion. A few months earlier he had been elected District President of the AEU without being on the DC, and with the success of the union behind him, he held that post for three years. In 1937 the ODD for the Midlands retired, and Stokes won the election on the first ballot, getting a majority over all of the other nine candidates.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ He then left the city to be based in Birmingham, and at the same time left the Communist Party, as apparently it had not supported his election.

For a time it looked as if the Riley success was a flash in the pan. In March 1934 500 leaflets about a meeting of Daimler men were distributed, but only 6 workers turned up. The DC accepted that the apathy of workers was caused by "the present position of the Society in being unable to get improved working conditions in the shop."⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ In May a propaganda campaign was held, and this produced fairly good attendances at factory gate meetings, but made no progress with evening meetings. However, it was clear that things were beginning to move. Small groups of members and non-members were beginning to meet together and take grievances to management. One such meeting was at the B.T.H. toolroom where a meeting agreed to ask for the abolition of piece-work in the toolroom, and a 2/- an hour rate instead.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ A deputation was to see the manager; one of its members was Cyril Taylor, who played an important part in unionising the firm. He also got onto the DC in the same year, and later became Convenor at Armstrong-Whitworth. An ex-member of the Communist Party, he supported Stokes on the DC, and was elected as District President of the Union a year after Stokes moved to Birmingham. On the death of Givens in September 1939 he was elected to the post of District Secretary.

In the summer and autumn of 1934 the DC campaigned for a 2/- an hour

rate for toolroom workers, and although this got nowhere, it kept up interest in the union and brought a few new members in. However, there was no sudden increase until there was reorganisation at Armstrong-Siddeley, particularly those sections dealing with aero-engines. As at Riley, this led to a well attended meeting, and the establishment in this case of 19 shop stewards.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ Shortly after this, the first serious shop stewards quarterly meeting for over a decade was held by the union.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ It was reported here that the B.T.H. now had a functioning shop stewards committee. In April 1935, after several abortive attempts, there was a meeting of 600 workers at Coventry Chain, which led to the setting up of a shop stewards committee and the granting by management of one week's paid holiday per year.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ In July the issue of the debt at Daimler led to an influx of members there and the establishment of shop stewards, while at more or less the same time the appointment of new rate-fixers amongst other things led to a dispute at G.E.C. Peel Connor Works. This mostly affected women members of the TGWU, but also led to a strengthening of AEU membership. Because of the dispute, the DC took a serious interest in what happened there, and Givens complained

"that the D.C. could not approve Shop Stewards promiscuously appointed, but required their particulars of membership etc., and asked that our members should elect their own stewards for their particular departments." (111)

Although the DC was not seeking the recruitment of women workers, it was still generally hostile to any involvement by the TGWU in the engineering industry, and no doubt it also wanted to avoid problems associated with an unofficial shop stewards movement. Various other shops saw the establishment of a shop stewards system, sometimes in a very modest way. At the Humber plant, there were eight shop stewards to begin with, but this

was gradually built up to a committee of about thirty.⁽¹¹²⁾ Very frequently, stewards would be elected even when most of the men were not union members, and their election led to the gradual increase in the number of new members. Thus in June 1936 the DC heard that about half the union membership was covered by shop stewards.⁽¹¹³⁾ At this time there were only just over four and a half thousand members, but the stewards must have covered many more workers than this, and so it was inevitable as stewards became used to their work, that membership would grow.

Although there were many skilled men in the city who were not members of the AEU, it is interesting to note that the vast majority of the new members joined the semi-skilled sections of the union. In reviewing the members who had joined since February 1934, a DC meeting in September 1935 found that out of 1,230 new members, only 112 joined either section I or section II. Sixty joined the apprentices section, and the rest joined the semi-skilled sections.⁽¹¹⁴⁾ Even at the beginning of 1939, when the union had nearly eleven thousand members, only 3,626 were in the skilled sections, while over 6,000 were in the semi-skilled sections. The basic problem was the confusion over the new types of work, which were basically semi-skilled, and the problems of getting the district rate which could have forced skilled workers into the semi-skilled sections. The figures show that the union was breaking through to semi-skilled workers, but it is also possible that skilled workers voluntarily opted for the semi-skilled sections, as they cost less. If this was the case, it would show an attitude to trade unions quite different from the traditional pride of holding a skilled man's card.

From about mid-1936 there was a gradual change in emphasis in

workplace conflict, with less importance being attached to recruitment, as this was going ahead fairly automatically, and more attention being given to getting recognition for shop stewards' committees and convenors. At B.T.H. there was a dispute over Taylor's right as a new convenor there.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ Management refused to allow him to attend works conferences, as they claimed that as he was not personally involved in an issue he had no right to be present. At the Humber it took nearly two years to get recognition of the Shop Stewards Committee, where Hamilton Payne, who got on to the DC in 1937, was the convenor.⁽¹¹⁷⁾ The Committee used to have to meet in a pub after work. At Riley the men threatened strike action to get recognition for the committee there, and short stoppages did take place in the years 1937 and 1938 in particular over the rights of stewards, convenors and committees.⁽¹¹⁸⁾ Two of the strongholds for the unions in the early thirties had been Armstrong-Whitworth and Armstrong-Siddeley, as there was little hostility shown to the unions by the management. There was no real battle for recognition needed, but the stewards found it difficult to get in as many members as they would like, and to find stewards for all sections.⁽¹¹⁹⁾

Gradually the number of convenors as well as stewards spread. In early 1938 a shop stewards meeting of the AEU heard reports from 11 convenors in most of the large factories in the city. Even the difficult factories like Morris Engines and Herberts had some organisation, though the unions were still not recognised at Morris.⁽¹²⁰⁾ This meeting appeared to lead to regular meetings of convenors as well as the quarterly stewards meetings. This was a significant step, as the existence of a convenor meant that as far as the DC was concerned there was one person in authority in the workshop, and it was easier therefore to keep him in

touch with the DC's own wishes. Power in the factory concentrated in the convenors' hands, and this lessened the danger of a shop stewards committee that would go against the DC.

By the outbreak of war union membership for the AEU was over 12,000 and while this meant that organisation was patchy, and in some places still very poor, considerable gains had been made, and on the whole, the improvement had gone smoothly. Although the CDEEA was concerned at the spread of membership in the late 1930s, it made no effort to organise resistance to unions, other than on the issue of young workers. At Cornercroft, one of the smaller engineering companies, there was a ten day strike to achieve recognition, but in most cases there was either no need for action or else a short sharp walkout.⁽¹²¹⁾

Although most employers had not had to deal with unions domestically for some time, most were members of the Employers' Association, and therefore in theory recognised unions and the national procedure for dealing with issues. As this was strengthened from the employers point of view by the 1922 agreement, there were fewer terrors involved in accepting unions than there had been in the past. However, acceptance at national or district level did not always mean that they were treated with respect in the factory. The probable reason why the recruitment campaign went comparatively smoothly was that the union shop steward committees were toeing the line, accepting the procedure, and accepting authority from the DC. The only area of independent organisation was the meeting together of stewards in the aircraft industry. The Employers' Association had been very sensitive to the existence of Communist groups in the aircraft industry,⁽¹²²⁾ and no doubt saw a shop stewards' movement there as a threat, but the movement had made little progress before the outbreak of war.

Unions had accepted the spread of piece-work, the right of unskilled and semi-skilled workers to run machines, the constant need for overtime, and in practice the impossibility of substantial increases on basic rates. Although there were many wage and conditions issues to fight over, and the battles were really just beginning before the war, employers did not appear to feel that their right to manage was being challenged. Employers' attitudes had changed, as well as those of the unions. The motor industry, and the aircraft industry and the various components suppliers were much more established and successful than they had been, and under piece-work the workshops had settled down to a considerable extent to self-regulation. In many factories, particularly in the aircraft industry and at Standard, Daimler, and Herberts, self-regulation took the form of gang work, in which the division of the work would very often be left up to the men themselves. It would be a mistake to regard this as a shopfloor movement taking power away from management, for it was basically an agreement between the men as to how to split up the earnings for a job, and could sometimes work against union pressure for higher earnings.⁽¹²³⁾ In a politically ambitious workforce, the ambiguities of the gang system could no doubt be exploited by shop stewards to establish areas of unilateral control, but there was no sign of this happening in the city before the war. Although a number of issues were assuming the proportion of serious disputes - skilled men's pay, rates for machinists, overtime - and there was an increase in the number of strikes in the city (see Table 6) there is no evidence of a build-up towards a confrontation over the right to manage as had occurred in 1922.

Confrontation in the sheet metal shops was around sectional control. Even in the 1920s the Birmingham Sheet Metal Workers Union and the National

Union of Sheet Metal Workers, which was less powerful locally, tried with some success to enforce a closed shop. Moreover, when a closed shop was in operation there would be strong attempts to impose shop limits. That is, where piece-work existed, the union would restrict the amount of work that any one worker could do, and the amount of earnings that could be achieved, in order to make it difficult for good piece prices to be reduced. This was more difficult to enforce in the 1920s, but the practice never died out after the lock-out. In 1924 the Sheet Metal Sub-Committee of the Employers' Association commented

"Whilst in the case of one or two firms it was apparent that a 'dead limit' of earnings was being worked to by the Tinsmiths employed, it was gratifying to note that the practice which obtained in this District in 1920 whereby 'dead limit' of earnings was in operation throughout the whole of the sheet metal shops had now been broken down." (124)

But in 1927 a survey indicated that there was definitely a limit in at least five out of thirteen shops, and by the mid 1920s it is likely that the limit covered all sheet metal shops, for by then it was spreading among semi-skilled workers. (125)

In December 1931 a curious incident showed the power of the Birmingham Sheet Metal Workers. It was reported to the union that two sheet metal workers were going over the union limit at the George Wilson Gas Meters factory. R. Baston, the union local official arrived at the shop, was allowed in by the foreman, who was a union member, and took the two offenders to the union head office in Birmingham. After several hours they were returned to work, having agreed to stick to the shop limit. They also agreed to pay to the union the excess earnings they had made. This abduction was done without any reference to the employer, and the Employers' Association complained bitterly of this highhanded

action, and blamed the manager, as he "had apparently in the past allowed Mr. Baston and the Society licence to do practically what they liked in his Sheet Metal Shop." A local conference was called on the issue, but Baston claimed that he had no knowledge of any shop limit, and that the men's trip to Birmingham had nothing to do with it! The Employers' Association was told that "it was suspected that a similar state of affairs existed in many Sheet Metal Shops in Coventry," and all sheet metal employers were urged in particular to keep secret the details of individual workers' earnings. (126)

By the late 1930s, the practice of having a production limit in each shop was widespread. Sheet metal workers tried to have a common limit across the city but without success. At Armstrong-Siddeley in 1939 the limit was 2/6d an hour; workers who earned more than that would not book it into their worksheet, but put it "at the back of the book." (127) As earnings went up, this sum in hand grew, and could become difficult to get hold of. A worker leaving Armstrong-Siddeley could take away with him up to £100 in work previously not booked. Where the gang system operated, and in particular where the chargehand was sympathetic to the union, even larger sums owing to the gang could accrue: in one reported case the gang kept coming in on Saturdays and Sundays to work it off, but only made it greater, and had £450 to come at the time the chargehand left. (128) As payments were linked to output, the high wage high output system seems to have been reasonably acceptable to employers, though no doubt they would have liked more control over piece-work prices. Nevertheless, there is a clear contrast between the strong fight put up by the employers against union controls at the workplace in the 1920s and the acceptance of production linked pay rises in the late 1930s.

The Birmingham Sheet Metal Workers in particular not only carried on a vigorous offensive against the employers, they were equally active in their struggle against other unions. In the 1930s their main target was the NUVB. Although this union had come through the traumatic days of the early 1920s in reasonable shape, it had long term problems due to the fact that its members until after the war had been wood and leather workers who had specialised in assembling these components in the motor industry. With the development of large scale production pressed steel replaced wood, and the union had to try to reestablish itself as a union generally covering skilled motor assembly workers. This produced a change of relations with various other unions, and the BSMW tried to compete with NUVB for sheet metal assembly workers. Perhaps the worst clash between the unions occurred at the Standard in September 1936. A group of sheet metal workers, apparently supported by a few AEU members, insisted that they should do the work done by NUVB members. When they failed to get their way, they took part in a sit-in strike, and were sacked. The employer thereupon tried to prevail on both the AEU and the NUVB to provide members of their unions to replace the sacked men. The AEU DC clearly had reservations about this, and decided to meet both the BSMW and NUVB, but separately. When they met Buckle, the NUVB official, he gave an eloquent plea as to the destructive effects of the Sheet Metal Workers Union:

"this question was not only related to the Standard but had been brewing for a long time between their Society and the Sheet Metal Workers, and was now a fight to the death. He accused the Sheet Metal Workers, not only of attempting an impossible claim for all metal work on Motor Car bodies but also of poaching their members....He drew attention to their Society being a composite Society, who were something more than 'Wood Butchers'..."

(129)

In the event, the NUVB were able to replace the Sheet Metal Workers in

this case, and claimed to have repulsed the BSMW by the end of 1937. The union's divisional organiser wrote in the union journal:

"The steel motor car body, pressed in sections, and the parts then welded together had in very large part superseded the wood or composite body and has revolutionised bodymaking and finishing operations in large scale shops and elsewhere.

In Coventry this development was seized upon by certain Metal Working Unions as a pretext for attempting to compel the removal of our members from Metal Bodymaking finishing operations. That attempt failed as did the attempt of the above Unions to recruit members at our expense. A good deal of feeling has been created through these unwarrantable efforts to deprive our members of work which they have been doing for a long time and to which they have an unquestionable right." (130)

However, membership of the NUVB fell off considerably in the early 1930s, and although it recovered and stabilised by 1936, it was at a substantially lower level than it had been at any time in the 1920s, so clearly it was failing to recruit many new members in an expanding industry.

The BSMW clashed from time to time with other unions as well. In 1932 they secured the dismissal of an AEU member at Sunrayn, and got a BSMW member to replace him. When challenged by the AEU, the union replied that

"they had no wish to offend the AEU, but having after considerable trouble with this firm, succeeded in establishing a Shop Rate of 2/- per hour, and the discharge of 4 cheap men, they intended to maintain this rate, and as our member was not a skilled man, he had been restarted as a labourer, which they thought was appropriate." (131)

This incident showed both that the Sheet Metal Workers were able to achieve rates well in excess of any other groups, but at the expense of the less fortunate, and that as a union they were not prepared to co-operate with others. The Union remained a maverick in the flesh of both employers and the rest of the labour movement.

Although a craft union, the NUVB sought to avoid the sectional

excesses of the BSMW. It had been hard hit by the new production methods. J. Francis, Midlands Organiser of the Vehicle Builders, frequently commented on the de-skilling of the motor industry:

"Once again it has to be said that each season, nay, almost every month that comes, sees the necessity for the skilled man's services becoming smaller. Once the jigs and the experimental bodies are made, out goes the skilled man and in comes the semi-skilled, and he, plus the machine, delivers the goods as the market demands, the result being, in our connection, the skilled man on the funds and the semi-skilled man on the job." (132)

But as the traditional skills associated with his union had all but disappeared, Francis did not link this with attacks on the semi-skilled for taking the skilled man's job away, but instead fought for a place for the skilled man, albeit in a small minority. This meant criticising the AEU at times. In referring to the aircraft industry, Francis wrote in his union journal:

"Dilution is being purposely 'talked big' when there is not the slightest need for it, and one wonders if there is not something sinister behind it all - a sort of idea that the skilled and semi-skilled Trade Unions may be brought to quarrel with each other, and thus enable the profiteers to get away with the spoils. Can it be that the refusal of the AEU to co-operate with the Aircraft Committees may have in it the seed of such development?" (133)

This was a reference to the Coventry Committee of the National Council of Aircraft Workers, which was a liaison body for trade unions in the industry. This body was set up in early 1936, and brought about ten unions together, including the NUVB and the TGWU.⁽¹³⁴⁾ It may well have been the existence of the TGWU on the Committee which stopped not only the AEU, but also the BSMW and the National Union of Sheet Metal Workers from sending delegates. In the event, the Committee appears not to have flourished, and wound up at the end of the year. As the largest union

in the city, the AEU was clearly less prepared to countenance possible rivals than was the NUVB. It was also suffering for its attitude over semi-skilled workers. After the war, it, more than any other union in the city, had realised the dangers of the employers' attempts to deskill the industry, and had borne the brunt of the employers' offensive. But that battle had been fought and lost, and it was difficult for the leadership of the union, and right up to the war every member of the AEU DC was a skilled man, to accept that defeat and concentrate on the new opportunities of recruiting across the engineering industry as a whole.

A feature of the revival of trade unionism in the city was the re-emergence of the Workers Union branches in the form of the TGWU. For some years the TGWU engineering branches were referred to in the Trades Council records as WU branches, despite the fact that the merger had taken place some seven years earlier. This reflected the maintenance of separate organisations from the TGWU non-engineering branches, in transport and building.⁽¹³⁵⁾ For a time, the latter were the only TGWU branches in the city, all of the old WU branches having effectively collapsed. By 1939 there were six engineering branches in Coventry, though most were fairly small. Although no figures exist, it is unlikely that engineering membership came to more than a couple of thousand. Relations between the AEU and the TGWU were not as bad as they had been between the AEU and the WU, but by no means could they be called cordial. The two unions had been involved in a big strike at the GEC plant in Stoke in 1935, where the TGWU had made the running, and had signed up many women workers, and the AEU had been highly critical of the settlement. It also refused to countenance any joint activity with the TGWU over the boys and apprentices

dispute, as it refused to recognise the existence of apprentices in the TGWU. In fact that union had only a few, and during the strike the head office of the union refused to support it. The Area Committee gave a small donation, but it was very clear that this was primarily an AEU affair.⁽¹³⁶⁾ The AEU sought to take in semi-skilled workers, with some success from 1937, but at the same time still sought to oppose dilution by semi-skilled workers. It also had no interest in the growing number of women workers.

One of its early gains in women's membership came in 1930 when the Rover Company tried to introduce the Bedaux system of payment by results into the factory. The Bedaux system sought to eliminate any payment for time rather than for production, and as such was acceptable to the Employers' Association, which pledged to

"give its firm support to any member who is seeking by the aid of Bedaux or otherwise to arrive at a more scientific appreciation of its managerial responsibilities and rights." ⁽¹³⁷⁾

A sub-committee of the Association was set up to look at the system, and this concluded that it would have to be based on negotiation like other payment by results systems, and therefore it and similar schemes were deemed to "raise no issues of a fundamental character that are of interest to the Association as such" and that its introduction was "a purely domestic issue on which the individual firm must make its own arrangements with its own labour."⁽¹³⁸⁾ Rover had already introduced the system in its Birmingham factory, but found opposition from the workforce in Coventry. Members of the NUVB, which was in force in the factory, "were quite adamant in their refusal to work this system," and so an attempt was made to begin in the unorganised trimming department, which contained mainly women.⁽¹³⁹⁾ As there was a strong NUVB presence, the women asked that union if they

could join, but apparently the union had decided earlier not to accept women members. The way was therefore open to the TGWU to step in and sign them all up. Francis remarked

"When what appeared to be an unjust imposition of a new system, the Women appealed to us for guidance and assistance. Our Coventry Officers recognised that to ignore their appeal would be disastrous to ourselves, as a development of women's work in the Trimming Departments would only mean in the end a curtailment of men's labour. We could not help them other than by moral support, and the Workers Union gladly took the opportunity of immediately enrolling them into membership.... Thus the result, foreseen by those who were in favour of female membership, of the decision against, has come about, and another union has now the right to enter into negotiations on behalf of workers in our trade." (140)

Joining the TGWU certainly did not solve all the women's problems. A works and local conference failed to agree, and the two unions took the matter to Central Conference. This found against them, for the issue at this stage had been whether there should be a joint investigation of the system. (141) The National Officers of the TGWU declared that they had no objection to the system, and locally the union followed suit, provided that guarantees were given. (142) Here the union seemed out of touch with its newly recruited members, for one month later they came out on strike against the system, claiming it had meant a speed-up and more work in shorter hours. The strike was made official, and after a couple of days the male trimmers, who were not directly involved, and were members of NUVB came out in sympathy, as they were refusing to do the women's work. The firm brought in blackleg women, but with the help of Alice Arnold, the women strikers organised their own pickets. Alice Arnold declared that "the girls are splendid. They know their work and are carrying out their duties well." (143) There were about 125 women on strike, with some 70 men out in support. Much of the publicity given

to the strikers in the local paper centred on Edward Buckle, the NUVB officer, rather than on Morris, the TGWU officer.⁽¹⁴⁴⁾ One feature that came out was a claim that the Employers' Association was circulating the names of strikers to other employers, to ensure that they were not taken on elsewhere. When this charge was raised at the Executive of the Employers' Association, the only record in the minutes is that "certain instructions were given to the Secretary."⁽¹⁴⁵⁾ In their own discussion, the employers felt that Rover had been in breach of procedure. It had got the agreement of the unions, but not of the workers concerned. In the press, however, the employers claimed that procedure had been followed, and that the strike was unconstitutional.⁽¹⁴⁶⁾ The women were out for three weeks, and the issue was effectively settled over their heads. The Managing Director of Rover arranged a meeting with Ernest Bevin and secured an agreement. This was put to the women the same evening, and they refused to accept it.⁽¹⁴⁷⁾ A further meeting took place the next day, where, according to the employers, the National Officer of the union addressed the women, and "with great difficulty induced them to agree."⁽¹⁴⁸⁾ In fact the agreement did not satisfy the Employers' Association either. It objected because it gave the same piece-work prices to workers doing the same job but in different grades, it proposed a guaranteed minimum of 55/- a week which was felt to be too high, and in particular, the union claimed it also agreed that the blackleg women should be sacked.⁽¹⁴⁹⁾ The women, according to the press, had insisted on this last point as an "overriding condition."⁽¹⁵⁰⁾ The Rover management was criticised by the local employers, but eventually they claimed that they would not "victimise" their blacklegs. In addition, the agreement was that the system should carry on, but only in the trimming shop.

The TGWU did not come of the dispute too well. It had not backed the women prior to the strike, and had virtually settled over their heads. Nevertheless, it had gained a foothold in the factory, and there it stayed. It had begun to show itself as the natural union for the growing number of women in the motor trade. However, its inability to provide workplace representatives that could effectively negotiate with management locally was a drawback. It is also interesting to note that the agreement to pay the same rate for the same jobs was regarded as being dangerous by the employers, as it was normal practice to go at least part of the way to placate the AEU by paying a craftsman more for doing the same job as a semi-skilled worker.

The TGWU also made ground during another strike involving women, this time in 1935 at GEC Stoke, the old Peel Connor telephone works. This employed about 3,000 manual workers, mostly women. The unions were very poorly organised at the time of the dispute. The AEU had 13 members out of 139 toolroom workers, and 12 members out of the 42 workers in the Model shop.⁽¹⁵¹⁾ There is no record of union membership among the female machinists. The dispute occurred because the company wished to go from a group bonus system to individual payment by results. The AEU had asked for a works conference on this issue, but had been refused, probably because it had no members involved, for initially the scheme was to be for about 300 workers in the capstan department. The scheme was put into operation, and led to a walkout in that department, which over the next few days spread throughout the factory, until there were over 2,500 out on strike.⁽¹⁵²⁾ The firm refused a works conference while there was a strike on, but agreed to an informal conference. Meanwhile Givens and Orrell for the AEU addressed the strikers, while the TGWU sent along a

Miss Weaver from another part of the area.⁽¹⁵³⁾ Despite the attempts by the unions, at first the workers themselves ran the strike. A committee of twenty was somehow set up on the second day, and this was recognised by the company which met it for talks.⁽¹⁵⁴⁾ The committee recommended to a mass meeting that there be a return to work, and this was put to the vote and carried. The return was on the understanding that there would be a works conference, and that the new system would be reviewed.

At the works conference, besides the union officials, there were 3 lay members of the AEU, and six women workers, who appear to have been members of the TGWU. It was agreed to try out the system for 12 weeks. The AEU DC when it received a report thought that this was unsatisfactory, and severely criticised the settlement, presumably feeling that the Strike Committee could have got the scheme removed altogether. It was clear that the AEU had not extended its influence over the mass of the strikers, and that the TGWU had had more success. At one point the works conference was adjourned to allow the TGWU officials to deal with a case of victimisation that had occurred as a consequence of the return to work.⁽¹⁵⁵⁾ The AEU claimed to have enrolled many members, but membership figures went up for the month as a whole by only two hundred, and not all of these would have come from GEC.⁽¹⁵⁶⁾ It is likely that the TGWU recruitment was very much higher.

The phenomenon of unorganised workers, men and women, going on strike shows the extent of the collapse of the unions in the 1920s. At some factories there was no organisation at all to give a lead, and union officials had to rush to disputes and try to influence them and sign up new members. In many cases, workers would go on strike and return to work without having joined a union.

A third large strike involving women and the TGWU took place in the autumn of 1937, and coincided with the apprentices' and boys' strike. This was outside the engineering industry, at Courtaulds. This company was a very substantial employer in the city, with about 4,000 workers at the Foleshill viscose yarn factory, and another 1,800 at the Little Heath acetate yarn factory further north. It had been company policy for decades to refuse to recognise unions, and various attempts to force recognition had failed, including brief strikes at the Foleshill plant in 1913 and 1931. (157)

In 1927 Samuel Courtauld signed the Mond letter which called for industrial peace between unions and employers, and led to the Mond-Turner talks. Hoping for a change of heart, the TGWU approached the Coventry plant for recognition, and were again repulsed, though this time not without some heart-searching. The manager of the plant sent a telegram to the strongly anti-union managing director, who was in America at the time. The telegram read,

"Union is being taunted by extremists that they have no organisation among our workers therefore they are anxious to move. They ask what our attitude will be and whether we will assist or at least let it be known amongst workers we would encourage movement."

This sounds like the most cap-in-hand approach for union recognition to have been taken in the city, and met inevitably with a brutal response. The managing director, in telling his subordinates to say no, claimed

"Your telegram reads to me an admission that extremists are by threats going to be permitted to rule." (158)

Like many anti-union firms, they were obsessed with cases of extremist activity, and blamed the brief strike in 1931 over the cuts in wages on the Minority Movement.

In 1937 the company had been forced to give recognition to engineering

workers, but the bulk of the workforce, mainly women, were untouched by the unions. It is unclear how the Courtaulds strike started, but once it did it spread very quickly with the women claiming they wanted the restoration of the 1931 pay reductions. Within two days of the first walkout, the local paper estimated that virtually all of the 6,000 workers at the two factories were out on strike.⁽¹⁵⁹⁾ The strike lasted nearly two weeks, and was remarkable for the degree of enthusiasm shown by the women and girls. (From photographs and press reports it appears that a high proportion of the strikers were girls or young women.)⁽¹⁶⁰⁾ On the second day of the stoppage at the Foleshill works, the Midland Daily Telegraph recorded "remarkable scenes" when hundreds of strikers returned to collect their pay packets and found themselves locked in. The women from the other factory at Little Heath had just joined the strike and turned up at Foleshill in force:

"Crowds of girls from Chapel Lane assembled outside the gates, and although the police were on the scene, they were unable to prevent them forcing open the gates, in the course of which a constable's helmet was knocked from his head." ⁽¹⁶¹⁾

At the Little Heath factory there was mass picketing, not just to stop people getting in, but to try to get in and drive out the few people left. On October 4th the police just contained a charge at the factory, and on the 5th, when a few girls returned, they were attacked by the pickets, and fighting with the police broke out.⁽¹⁶²⁾ However, after a few more days, there was a gradual return to work at Little Heath, and by the end of the strike the majority of workers there were already back at work. Most of the Foleshill strikers stayed out.

Despite the vigour of the strike, it seemed, even more than the boys' struggle at the same time, to be a case of "spontaneous combustion."

After the first two days the strikers had daily mass meetings, and on the fourth day of the strike delegates reported that they had tried to see the Courtaulds management three or four times, but had been refused admission, and therefore were considering calling in the TGWU.⁽¹⁶³⁾ Had the company met the request for higher wages quickly, it is very likely that it could have stopped the issue of recognition for the union from taking over. As it was, the management pointed out that they had a policy of paying some of the highest wages in the city, and that the cuts of 1931 had been made up through bonus. It is true that the only organised group, the engineers, got good wages, and they took no part in the struggle.

It was nearly a week after the strike had begun that the mass meeting voted to form a branch of the TGWU, and heard speeches from local officials.⁽¹⁶⁴⁾ There may have been some opposition, for a couple of days later there was a vote of confidence in the Strike Committee for co-operating with the union.⁽¹⁶⁵⁾ Eventually the National Secretary of the Artificial Silk section of the union negotiated a return to work for the four thousand still out, on the basis of recognition of the union and the promise of further talks on pay.⁽¹⁶⁶⁾ Ironically, the further talks failed to get any pay increases, but the TGWU had recruited 1,800 members in two days, and no doubt quite a few more after that, and had established itself in the company.

These strikes showed that while the TGWU lacked local experience, it was not handicapped by any sectional attitudes, and was positively keen to recruit all and every category of worker. This made it especially attractive to women, who, in the Courtauld strike in particular, but also in the others, made it very clear that they were not to be regarded for ever as cheap anti-union labour, and that their determination

to fight could, on occasion, match that of men. Indeed, at Courtaulds, the organised men did not join the strike, and the men that came out were amongst the first to go back before the dispute was settled.

It was clear that the potential for growth for the TGWU was considerable. No doubt it would have grown faster in Coventry before the war had the resources been there, but although there were a couple of union officials based in the city, one of them covered much of the South Midlands, and Alice Arnold had not been replaced, nor was there a successor to George Morris when he died in 1933.⁽¹⁶⁷⁾ There were a number of complaints from the Coventry District Committee about the lack of officer coverage, and although officers from other areas came into the city from time to time, it was only in 1939 that it was decided to acquire new offices and appoint another full time officer.⁽¹⁶⁸⁾ There was no suitable applicant for the post from Coventry, so the job went to Jack Jones, who moved to the city from Liverpool. By the autumn it was reported that "he had settled down to his duties very well and was already showing great promise."⁽¹⁶⁹⁾

IV The New Trade Unionism

The resurgent trade unionism of the late 1930s was very different from the trade unions of the immediate post-war years. In the first place the revolutionary trimmings no longer existed. There was no repetition of the mood of revolutionary fervour that gripped a part of the labour movement after the war. The left was, if anything, in a stronger position within the union movement, but instead of preparing for the forthcoming Coventry Soviet, was concerned with more modest aims such as a broad movement against fascism. Clearly the improved economic situation made it

impossible to predict that the collapse of the capitalist system was well under way, and the increasingly grim political situation had less impact on Coventry workers, as their livelihood to a considerable extent depended on rearmament.

A more important omission from the revived trade union movement were the Workshop Committees. Individual union activists were concerned with building the union as they knew it rather than changing trade unionism into units organising everyone on the shop floor. The informal structures had perished in the 1920s, and the formal structures had survived, so there was less experimentation, more acceptance of the existing unions as the natural order of things. It was generally accepted that shop stewards would remain loyal to one union and only work with other unions through the joint shop stewards committees, where these existed. These sought to unite workers in different unions, but not to challenge the legitimacy of the unions themselves, which some of the workers committee had attempted to do. The coming to prominence of convenors was an important development. A convenor was necessary in the workplace to bring together the many sectional struggles over piece-work and to impose some form of strategy on the stewards. He was also necessary for the union establishments outside the workplace, as a link in a chain of authority (later to become a chain of negotiation). As for the shop stewards, they had both gained and lost power compared with the stewards of the earlier period; gained because piece-work put more flexibility and negotiating power into the hand of a steward, no longer tied to the district rate, lost because a narrow concentration on earnings meant that the steward depended on others for information, organisation and strategy. By 1939 there were many shop stewards in the city; there was

as yet little sign of a shop stewards' movement.

The basic issue had changed as well. In the early 1920s, the engineering unions still had hopes of imposing their vision on the workplaces - a vision of a conservative, stable, hierarchical society, with fixed grades and common standards. By the late 1930s it was clear to all what an impossible dream this had been. The employers controlled the workshops, and employed the labour they wanted to do the jobs they wanted them to do, at the rates they set. The issue of establishing some order in the chaos of different jobs was still important, but had the importance of grading exercise rather than a statement of authority. The other issues of protecting skills and preserving differentials were of importance to only a minority and were themselves a consequence of the defeats of the 1920s. A greater concentration on cash rewards was thus made inevitable. It is not argued that the unions of the late 1930s were more concerned with earnings than the earlier unions, as this is the basic issue that runs through trade unionism. The earlier unions had been more concerned with the conditions under which money was earned; the later with the cash itself.

Alongside these differentials should be borne in mind the gradual widening of the gap between the Labour Party and the unions. Most new trade unionists did not join the Labour Party, and as we have seen there was no corresponding rise in Party membership to match that of the unions.

Despite the lack of militancy, the union revival probably owed more to the CP and other left forces than had the development of trade unionism after 1917. While the conditions of almost full employment made a revival possible, it was the left which provided the personnel in many cases to

build the shop stewards' movement in the factories, and in doing so they strengthened the position of the left in the city's unions. With the reappearance of Stokes on the AEU DC the left usually had the majority of votes on that committee from the mid-1930s. Its influence was shown in the election of Stokes and Taylor for the two full time jobs in the union. Although little is known about the work of the TGWU in the city before the war, again it appears to have had a number of left activists prominent in the leadership, such as Jock Gibson, Billy Welling and Bill Buxton. The Trades Council quickly got over the disputes that it had suffered in 1930, and the left, in particular the Communist Party, soon re-established leadership there. In 1935 Billy Wellings, a Communist, was the President, and J.H. Ward who was on the AEU DC for much of the period, and who had been an active Labour Party member of the Minority Movement, was secretary.⁽¹⁷⁰⁾ A year later Wellings became the secretary and Jock Gibson, another Communist, became President.⁽¹⁷¹⁾ In 1937 the Council collected over £1,000 for the fund for the striking young workers in the engineering industry.⁽¹⁷²⁾ There was not all round improvement in the Trades Council work; one of its annual obligations was to organise a May Day March and other activities. In 1933 the Annual Report complained:

"It is becoming increasingly clear that the objects of May Day are practically unknown to the young worker, and the older members have lost faith in its application."

(173)

Reports for later years show an improvement generally in trade union and Trades Council work, but support for May Day activity remained low; the brief tradition of big marches and events had died out. Despite left leadership, the militancy of the late thirties was of a much narrower kind than that of the early twenties. By the outbreak of the war, the

Coventry Communist Party still had less than a hundred members, so it would be well not to overestimate its influence, but this was probably more than it had at any time since its foundation in 1920, and unlike the late 1920s and early 1930s, it was prepared to work closely with non-Party members.⁽¹⁷⁴⁾ Part of the narrowness of the militancy was due to the lack of a single issue which united the unions and workers in the different factories. In 1922 the issue had been forced by employers, and the unions were fighting a defensive struggle for trade union rights. But in the 1930s it was surprisingly easy to establish some basic union rights, while the offensive on pay and conditions was fought in an isolated way within each shop.

A tradition of trade unionism implies that there is a common opinion on certain issues and principles that is applied through struggle over a period of many years. The trade union traditions in the engineering industry in the city had always been weak. The struggles of the 1920s in one sense were an attempt to establish a tradition that already existed in other engineering centres. Its failure meant that the new trade unionism of the late 1930s was even weaker in its sense of tradition. In more immediate terms this was likely to lead to a concentration on those issues which it knew it was successful at, an acceptance of the rights of the employer, and a lack of confidence in the ability of the trade unions and working class parties to really change society. This limited consciousness allowed room for some of the ideas and values of the ruling class to remain.

While the trade unionism of the late 1930s was a somewhat different creature from the unionism of the post-war period, the leadership of the craft unions in particular, both full-time officers and lay officials,

had changed remarkably little. This provided continuity, but also a barrier to realising the full potential of the new situation. Thus the AEU leadership had understood the benefits to its membership of an ordered workplace with priority given to skill, and had fought vigorously against the employers' offensives on skills. The same leadership fifteen years later was still scarred by this experience, suspicious of semi-skilled workers, deeply hostile to piece-work, resentful of the fragmentation of the union movement. It lacked the desire to exploit the power over production yielded to it by the employers, and the imagination needed to convert the piece-work system into a weapon for trade unionism as well as a weapon against it. In 1939 the unions were barely out of the convalescent stage, and the potentials of the shop floor were to be more clearly seen during the war. Thus the two weaknesses existed together; a difficulty in adjusting to the new relations of production, and the failure to achieve a labour movement with confidence in itself to achieve the goal of a more just society. The first weakness was to be overcome later, but the second, the "loss of faith" referred to by the Trades Council report, was not to be recovered; after all, it had barely existed for a few years anyway.

TABLE 6Industrial Relations Activity in Coventry 1932-1937

	<u>No. of Works Conferences</u>	<u>No. of Local Conferences</u>	<u>References to Central Conference</u>	<u>Strikes</u>
1932	5	0	0	1
1933	3	3	1	3
1934	6	3	1	3
1935	20	3	0	2
1936	22	11	3	10
1937	17	14	?	?

Figures are not available for the number of central conference references and strikes in 1937. As the information comes from the records of the Coventry and District Engineering Employers' Association, it is highly likely that it would underestimate the number of strikes in the city.

FOOTNOTES

The Unions in Recovery

1. AEU District Committee Minutes, 17th June 1930.
2. " " " " 2nd June 1931.
3. AEU Monthly Journal and Report, August 1931.
4. AEU District Committee Minutes, 12th January 1932.
5. " Monthly Journal and Report, May 1934.
6. " " " " " June 1935, January 1937.
7. W.B. Stephens, "Motor-Vehicle Manufacture" in A History of the County of Warwick, Volume 8. ed. W.B. Stephens.
8. ibid.
9. ibid.
10. ibid, plus Board of Trade Papers BT70 Coventry Factories 1935.
11. G. Oliver, The Rover, Cassell 1971, pp. 97-104.
12. W.B. Stephens, op.cit.
13. ibid.
14. W. Hornby, History of the Second World War, Factories and Plant, HMSO, 1958, p.203.
15. ibid, p.291.
16. Coventry Employment Exchange, Monthly Returns.
17. Medical Officer of Health, Annual Report, 1940.
18. AEU District Committee Minutes, 25th February 1930.
19. " " " " 4th March 1930.
20. " " " " 23rd January 1933.
21. " " " " 12th March 1935.
22. Interviews with Norman Edwards, TGWU Shop Steward, R.T. Taylor, TGWU Shop Steward and Mrs. Taylor, Standard worker.
23. MDT 8th October 1937, 9th October 1937.

24. AEU District Committee Minutes, 24th November 1937.
25. " " " " 22nd December 1936.
26. " " " " 15th July 1934.
27. " " " " 4th February 1930.
28. J. Varley, Apprentices and the Employment of Apprentices. Notes as to the Coventry Position 13th March 1929, CDEEA Paper.
29. Interview with C. Taylor, AEU Convenor and District Secretary from 1939.
30. National Union of Vehicle Builders, Quarterly Report, January 1931. The CDEEA Record men at the Humber accepting boys rates in January 1932.
31. J. Varley, op.cit.
32. AEU Monthly Journal and Report, June 1930.
33. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 20th August 1923.
34. " " " " 14th November 1922.
35. " " " " 27th September 1937.
36. AEU District Committee Minutes, 5th January 1936.
37. J. Varley, op.cit.
38. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 17th December 1934.
39. AEU District Committee, Minutes, 3rd December 1935.
40. " " " Membership Returns. In 1935 there were 358 boys beginning an indentured apprenticeship of five years.
41. AEU District Committee Minutes, 6th April and 13th April 1937.
42. " " " " 27th April 1937.
43. " " " " 11th May 1937.
44. " " " " 1st June 1937.
45. " " " " 21st September 1937.
46. MDT 28th September 1937.
47. " 28th September 1937.
48. " 29th September 1937.

49. MDT 30th September 1937.
50. " " " "
51. CDEEA Executive Committee, Minutes, 27th September 1937.
52. MDT 1st October 1937.
53. AEU District Committee, Minutes, 2nd October 1937.
54. " " " " " " "
55. " " " " 5th October and 12th October 1937.
56. " " " " " " 1937.
57. " " " " 10th October 1937.
58. " " " " 14th October 1937.
59. CDEEA Executive Committee, Minutes, 18th October 1937.
60. " " " " 15th November 1937.
61. AEU District Committee Minutes, 7th December 1937.
62. " " " " 21st December 1937.
63. AEU " " Membership returns.
64. " " " Minutes, 7th May 1935.
65. " " " " 23rd July 1935.
66. " " " " 31st October 1935.
67. " " " " 3rd March 1936.
68. " " " " 5th March 1936.
69. " " " " 17th March 1936.
70. " " " " 5th March 1936.
71. " " " Monthly membership returns.
72. " " " " " "
73. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 21st September 1931.
74. " " " " 2nd May 1932.
75. " " " " 18th May 1936.
76. " " " " 26th October 1936.

77. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 18th December, and AEU District Committee Minutes, 19th December 1933.
78. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 16th April 1934.
79. " " " " 18th June 1934, and AEU District Committee Minutes, 19th June 1934.
80. CDEEA Executive Committee, Minutes, 16th July 1934.
81. AEU District Committee Minutes, 24th July 1934, and CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 20th August 1934.
82. AEU District Committee Minutes, 18th September 1934 and 25th September 1934.
83. " " " " 2nd October 1934.
84. AEU Monthly Journal and Report, November 1934.
85. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 9th September 1936.
86. AEU District Committee Minutes, 16th March 1937.
87. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 15th June 1936.
88. " " " " 9th September 1937.
89. AEU Monthly Journal and Report, August 1930.
90. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 19th July 1937.
91. AEU District Committee Minutes, 23rd July, 30th July, 13th August 1935.
92. AEU Monthly Journal and Report, November 1935, and AEU District Committee Minutes, 9th October 1935.
93. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 17th January 1938.
94. " " " " " " "
95. " " " " 26th January 1937.
96. " " " " 3rd November 1930.
97. " " " " 20th May 1935.
98. " " " " 7th May 1923.
99. " " " " 5th October and 26th October 1936.
100. AEU District Committee Minutes, 14th February 1934.
101. " " " " 27th February 1934.
102. " " " " 27th July 1934.

103. AEU District Committee Monthly returns of membership.
104. AEU District Committee Monthly membership returns.
105. AEU Monthly Journal and Report, April 1937.
106. AEU District Committee Minutes, 27th March 1934.
107. " " " " 1st May 1937.
108. " " " " 8th January 1935 and 22nd January 1935.
109. " " " " 11th February 1935.
110. " " " " 9th April 1935.
111. " " " " 27th August 1935.
112. Interview with Norman Edwards, Humber Shop Steward.
113. AEU District Committee, Minutes, 30th June 1936.
114. " " " " 10th September 1935.
115. " " " Annual membership returns.
116. " " " Minutes, 16th July 1936.
117. Interview with Norman Edwards.
- 118.
- 119.
120. AUE District Committee Minutes, 10th April 1938. First reports of AEU shop stewards at Morris Motors were in April 1938.
121. AEU Monthly Journal and Report, December 1938, and January 1939.
122. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 19th September 1927. Also report of receipt of a national circular about sabotage received, in Minutes of 19th October 1931. Employers were warned to keep their fire extinguishers well maintained. The secretary of the Association, J. Varley, also read the Daily Worker, and reported on items of local interest.
123. The gang system in Coventry has been put forward as a form of industrial democracy. See D. Rayton, (R. Glove) Shop Floor Democracy in Action, published by the Industrial Common Ownership Movement, 1972. He worked for Armstrong-Whitworth for a time in the late 1930s.
124. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 2nd June 1924.
125. " " " " 4th April 1927.
126. " " " " 21st December 1931.

127. Interview with Cyril Taylor.
128. Interview with R. Taylor, re Armstrong-Whitworth.
129. AEU District Committee Minutes, 24th September 1936.
130. National Union of Vehicle Builders Quarterly Report and Journal, January 1937.
131. AEU District Committee Minutes, 2nd February 1932.
132. NUVB Quarterly Report and Journal, October 1931.
133. " " " " " April 1936.
134. National Council of Aircraft Workers: Coventry and District Local Committee Minutes, 15th January 1936 - 16th December 1936.
135. Coventry Trades Council, Annual Report, 1933.
136. Transport and General Workers Union, Area Committee Minutes, 20th January 1938. The area covered most of the Midlands.
137. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 23rd June 1930.
138. " " " " " " "
139. " " " " 7th July 1930.
140. NUVB Quarterly Report and Journal, July 1930.
141. " " " " " " " and CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 2nd June 1920.
142. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 7th July 1930.
143. MDT 9th September 1930.
144. " " " " and 10th September 1930.
145. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 8th September 1930.
146. " " " " " " "
147. MDT 13th September 1930.
148. CDEEA Executive Committee Minutes, 15th September 1930.
149. CDEEA Executive Committee " " " "
150. MDT 13th September 1930.
151. AEU District Committee Minutes, 23rd July 1935.

152. MDT 22nd and 23rd July 1935.
153. " 24th July 1935.
154. " 23rd and 24th July 1935.
155. AEU District Committee Minutes, 30th July 1935.
156. " " " Monthly membership returns.
157. D.C. Coleman, Courtaulds; An Economic and Social History, Volume II. Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 163, 439.
158. ibid, pp. 437-8.
159. MDT 2nd October 1937.
160. " 1st October 1937.
161. " 5th October 1937.
162. " 5th October 1937.
163. " 4th October 1937.
164. " 7th October 1937.
165. " 8th October 1937.
166. " 9th October 1937.
167. The only TGWU official who dealt exclusively with Coventry affairs at this time was Billy Nelson.
168. TGWU Area Committee Minutes, 20th April and 20th July 1939.
169. " " " " 19th October 1939.
170. Coventry Trades Council, Annual Report, 1935.
171. " " " " " 1936.
172. " " " " " 1937.
173. " " " " " 1933.
174. Interview with Jack Cohen, Communist Party member.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis has been to see the way working-class consciousness developed in Coventry in this period, and in particular, to see why the working class was unable to challenge capitalist rule. This raises the need to deal with the structure of the ruling class in the city.

In Coventry in this period there were two distinct groupings which complemented each other but which were so far apart as to form a two-headed ruling class. The first group went under the political heading of the Coalition, and this is a useful characterisation, for it was also a social coalition of people engaged in trade, commerce, the professions and fairly small-scale manufacturers. The Coalition dominated the social and political life of the city for most of this period. It controlled the commercial and shopping centre and was able to sustain a small-scale anachronistic business centre in a large engineering city. It had access to patronage through the charities, it had an important voice in the press, it controlled the boys' grammar schools, it controlled the municipal administration and propagated its values through the banks, stores, and building societies.

The second group consisted of the employers of labour on a large or medium scale. Most major engineering companies had senior managers representing them in the Coventry and District Engineering Employers Association, which was the organising force for senior management and directors. In some cases their relations with their employees were still paternalist, but in most instances they exercised their control purely by virtue of the ownership of the machines and the payment of wages. This

control was mediated by foremen and chargehands, who were in direct contact with the workers. Power was exercised through either coercion or persuasion. When necessary there was direct intimidation of those who opposed the most efficient use of machinery. When necessary, reasonable working conditions and high wages were allowed. The unfettered managerial control of technology from 1922 onwards meant that the work-process itself controlled the workforce, in particular where piece-work prevailed. Most major companies also made attempts to win the loyalty of the workforce through the use of house journals, and the approval given to social and sports clubs.

These two groups occupied separate spheres and performed separate functions. The Engineering employers were in the most powerful group in the ruling class, they exercised hegemony over all, and their decisions shaped the whole life of the city. But the Coalition exercised the role of political and civic leadership, controlling the public and private municipal institutions. The fact that the groups carried out roles that were complimentary, and were linked with a broadly similar ideology, enabled them to operate from day to day with remarkably little contact. What contacts there were should not be underestimated, in particular the key role of John Varley, a local solicitor and scion of the Coalition, and secretary of the CDEEA, and Edward Iliffe, proprietor of the Midland Daily Telegraph and Conservative politician. Iliffe seldom involved himself in Coventry affairs directly, but used his newspaper to create a link between the Coalition, from which he came, and the engineering employers.

Nevertheless, the gulf between the employers and the Coalition was large, and it would be a mistake to see the Coalition group purely as the

front-men for the employers, for although sure to be sympathetic to the needs of industry, they had a vigour and personality of their own.

Both social groups derived strength from those parts of the ruling class that were dominant at national level, and at this level the engineering employers were seen to be of more significance than the Coalition. But it was the Coalition that created the particular aspects of social life in Coventry; the highly elitist boys grammar schools, the development of technical education, the gearing of the educational system into the needs of industry, and the development of a housing policy in line with both industrial need and the aspirations of the Coalition. It was with the Coalition that the Labour Party fought, rather than with the employers, for the separation of roles within the ruling class encouraged a similar specialisation within the labour movement.

Both of the two major groups that created the ruling class were stable in their social composition. The working class on the other hand underwent continual change in this period. During the war, large numbers of young men and women came to the city, and their ranks were swollen again in the late 1930s by another influx. In the war period some came from country areas or from industries other than engineering. The suddenness of the growth of engineering meant that there was no strong tradition amongst workers of engineering craftsmanship in the city. Coventry was a young city, as far as both the engineering industry and workers were concerned, and the ways of trade unionism had to be learnt. Like all other cities, Coventry had a trade union movement that went back many years, a Trades Council and various unions. But the affairs of these bodies seem to be of little importance in the face of the influx during the war, the development of a new type of trade unionism in the shop stewards movement,

and the big post-war unrest, culminating in the struggle in 1922. The labour movement and the labour tradition as modified during this period, carried on during the years of defeat, and provided a basis for the return to trade unionism in the late 1930s. Overall, however, trade unionism in Coventry achieved only a shallow implantation in the minds of workers.

When conditions were ripe, as in 1917 or 1937, then workers turned to unions and joined in large numbers. When conditions were difficult they left, and their leaving was faster than their joining. A powerful shop stewards' movement disappeared very quickly, as did other institutions such as the CEJC. It is interesting to note that while the shop stewards' movement was very extensive during the war it did not develop the independence from the official movement that occurred in some other areas. A new semi-skilled workforce was content to accept traditional leadership, and as it saw trade unionism as something that a leadership did, and not as self-activity, it was prepared to desert it as well. There was certainly the development of a basic sympathy for Labour and the working class, shown both in the increased labour votes in local and national elections and in the remarkable response of non-unionists during the general strike. The basic class loyalty was there, but for much of the time trade unionism was not a necessary part of that loyalty. Many of those who had been shop stewards during the war acquiesced to the spread of non-unionism after the lock-out. It should be borne in mind that whereas the CDEEA showed its organising ability to the full in the lock-out and certainly victimised trade unionists after it, throughout much of the 1920s and 1930s there was no absolute barrier to unionism coming from management. There was also no strong demand for unions coming from the workshops.

For many workers, in particular the semi-skilled workers who had never been in trade unions for more than a few years at a time, "unionism was skin deep. This meant that the traumatic events that shaped the labour movement, the war, the lock-out and the general strike, had a much smaller impact on those who were not part of the comparatively small group that made up the core and active membership of the trade unions and the rest of the labour movement. Such events were incidental to the ordinary business of living, and in most of the situations that made up the business of living, the ideology of the ruling class was strong, and the influence of the labour movement weak.

The institutions of the working class that had been thrown up by the war - shop stewards systems, workers committees, the CEJC - perished in the conflicts after the war, and power in the unions returned to the district committees. These were isolated from the workshops and reinforced the division between activist labour movement worker and uninvolved non-union worker. Removal from the workshops also constituted a barrier to the district committees coming to grips with the new situation. This was particularly true of the AEU, the dominant union in the city after the war. Craft militancy, a tradition which had to be imported into the city, had played an important but ambiguous role in mobilising workers during the war, and had fought against the managerial onslaught in the 1922 lock-out. By the late 1920s, however, it had lost most of its progressive nature. The craft outlook by then served to distance the union leaderships from the mass of the workers in the factories, and to hinder the growth of the unions. Only gradually, in the late 1930s did the AEU leadership come to relinquish some of its exclusiveness, redefining the problems of the skilled minority in terms of differentials rather than in terms of separate craft organisation. Their failure to adapt craft

traditions to the new circumstances inhibited the growth of any broader tradition of militancy and organisation which might have challenged the narrow role accepted by shop stewards in the factories during the revival of the late 1930s. The new unionism of that period concentrated on payment by results and neglected all issues concerned with question of control, or with broader political questions. Retention of the craft tradition had created a barrier between the leadership and the ordinary semi-skilled workers, who lacking a strong tradition, and being practical men, settled for what they could get. As the new trade unionism was not seriously challenged by employers, and as it could deliver better wages and conditions, that to many, seemed a satisfactory state of affairs.

It would be wrong to overstate the argument; the militancy of the craft tradition did survive, and to some extent was incorporated in the new unionism; employers still disliked unions, and accepted them only with reluctance. But the basic problem of an isolated union leadership remote from the workplaces and a new union organisation that flourished in an atmosphere of deskilling and payment by results did lead to a narrowing of union horizons, and a de facto acceptance of the managers' right to manage, and the rulers' right to rule.

Just as in the Coalition ruling class there was a clear split between the employers group and the Coalition group, so in the working class there grew to be a division between the industrial wing and the political wing. Before the war this division did not exist; by 1937 it was evident that the capture of power by the Labour Party would have little real effect on the position of the trade unions. During the war and in the immediate post-war years the Labour Party had only a secondary role in the struggles in the city. It was not until after the defeat of

the trade unions that Labour began to assert itself as the leading body in the industrial/political alliance. From the late 1920s it grew in importance as its local and parliamentary votes increased, while the trade unions remained in deep depression. There was, therefore, an encouragement for labour movement activists to move from the trade union movement of the early 1920s to the Labour Party in the late 1920s. In establishing an independent role for itself, and in developing an organisation that could take office and sustain Labour in power, it was necessary for the Party to become more organised and more professional. But because this happened while the unions were very weak, the Party learnt the habit of operating without much union support, and this in turn encouraged the Labour leadership to see the Party as the dominant force in the labour movement. Thus while the dominant force in the ruling class was at all times the engineering employers, the leadership of the labour movement shifted in the 1920s from the industrial to the political side. As a result it is possible to say that the election of a Labour team to control the city in 1937 was a bigger victory for the working class than it was a defeat for the ruling class. The group that was used to governing, the Coalition, lost power for good, but much of its political and social influence remained. The employers, aloof from the conflict, had little to fear from the change.

The dominance of the Labour Party was achieved without massive help from the unions, and with only a comparatively small active Party membership. In 1937 the activity of the Labour Party was outside the scope of the large majority of working people. It had grown without the mass movement to back it, and it had only a weak social and cultural influence within the working class. It provided political leadership but left untouched the many areas of life where ruling class ideology was strong.

The Labour leadership was aware of the ways in which the ruling class ruled. It suspected the charities and building societies, it saw the use of education as well as the municipal machine, and was well aware of the dominance of the big employers. But its political practice was confined to municipal politics centred on immediate social issues. The aspect of municipal affairs that attracted most attention from the Labour group on the City Council was housing. Less attention was given to education, and here the emphasis was on the physical state of the schools rather than on the content of education. The Labour programme was one of fairly immediate social reforms. There were a number of reasons for this. In the first place the social problems of the city had been badly neglected by the Coalition, and it was their good fortune that the problems were no worse. Labour could take up issues directly affecting the standard of living of many people, and this was likely to help attract support in the elections. In the second place, Labour tended to accept without question the constraints put upon local authorities. It did not seek to use local political power to create a new kind of socialist city. The Labour leadership prided itself on containing practical men, who were concerned with the technicalities of power rather than the implementation of theories. The leaders wished to apply their industrial skills to the field of social engineering, and they shied away from grandiose blueprints for the future. The third reason why emphasis was put on immediate social needs was that the Labour Party in the city had no consistent theory of society, or to put it another way, was consistently untheoretical. This is not quite the same as the second point. Labour councillors underestimated the strength of the ruling class, and could not develop a strategy for removing all of its power. The Party was capable of developing programmes to meet social needs, but not capable of developing a programme to maximise the

power of the working class, and therefore could eliminate the power of the ruling class only in the narrow field of traditional municipal politics.

Labour did have some sort of vision of a socialist Coventry behind its programme of reforms. It was not well developed, and was based on a policy of municipalising various trades and professions. The vision seemed to be of a city run as a giant co-op. But in 1937 there were no plans as to how municipalisation was to work, and the only changes to the structures of local authority politics was to make the Council system more efficient, and more elitist.

The weakness of the trade union movement meant there was little to prevent the Labour Party taking a fairly narrow view of local politics. The fact that the leadership of the party concentrated on reforms meant that they were reformist, but this characterisation needs to be qualified. In this period the reformists still believed in a revolution, while the revolutionaries could not practice what they preached. Reformism is normally taken to mean the abandonment of a strategy for a working class revolutionary seizure of power, and the acceptance of a policy based on immediate reforms with no long term objective. The leaders of the local Labour Party had abandoned a revolutionary strategy, but it was an important part of their belief that they were working for "full socialism." They had no programme for achieving socialism, but still clung to a belief in a socialist future, and a belief that their actions were somehow bringing this nearer. Criticisms made by the Communist Party, particularly during its isolationist phase, tended to see reformism as a cynical betrayal of the workers. This seriously underestimated the strength of reformism; it could contain genuine socialist aspirations while having a practical

appeal, of getting done that which could be done.

In more concrete terms, however, this reformism combined practical politics with socialist rhetoric, and this combination was all that the main stream of the socialist movement amounted to in this period. The emergence of the Labour Party had been achieved by subordinating or defeating other trends or movements in the labour movement; the ILP, the CP, the Co-op, the Trades Council and the trade unions. The claim by the Labour Party to be the conscience of the labour movement did nothing to encourage the new trade unionists of the 1930s, to build socialist aims into their trade union practice. A trade unionist carried out his unionism at work and his socialism, if any, in the Labour Party outside work. This division naturally made it impossible to achieve an overall critique of the working of the capitalist system, and a strategy for change.

The Communist Party survived throughout these years as a left alternative to Labour politics, sometimes working with other left-wingers inside and outside the Labour Party. It sought to avoid any division between politics and trade unionism, but like the Labour Party, had a narrow view of politics. This did not take the form of municipal politics, but of economism, a concentration on the industrial struggle that was linked to a reductionist view that tended to see all issues as a reflection of a basic class struggle.

In the years after the war the whole of the capitalist system in Britain went through a period of severe crisis. To the Communists, the hour of revolution was at hand, and their policies during the early 1920s were characterised by considerable over-optimism about the collapse of capitalism. Policies tended to be short-term, and the Labour Party was

attacked for betraying workers. The sectarianism that flourished in these years died down after the lock-out, but never quite disappeared, and flourished again in the late 1920s. In the late 1930s the Party reestablished itself in the city, though it was still very small, and contributed to the growth of the unions. However, while it sought to politicise the union movement it lacked an outlet for political expression, and found it very difficult to avoid being more than an industrial ginger group. Outside the unions it was politically isolated for most of the period. In the few years after its formation when it had its greatest mass support, it overplayed its hand by challenging the Labour Party directly. Its defeat strengthened the Labour Party. Its self-willed isolation in the late 1920s at the time of the final emergence of the Coventry Labour Party as a major force meant that it could not contribute as it might have done to putting up trade union checks to Labour ambition through the Trades Council or work with the Labour left. Its political impact on the city, then, was remarkably small.

By the end of this period the Labour Party was in power in the city, while the trade union movement was growing rapidly and showing increasing signs of militancy. But the engineering employers were also much stronger, and had used the two decades to equip themselves to contain the trade union movement.

This local study has sought to show the main influences on the development of working class consciousness in this period. A number of factors have been shown to be of particular importance, and their wider relevance could be dealt with through similar studies of other localities. In Coventry the structure of the ruling class, and in particular the division between employer and local politician and tradesman was of importance,

as it promoted the division between the industrial wing and the political wing of the local labour movement. This division was a national phenomenon, but the speed and completeness of its occurrence in Coventry owed much to the concentration of the engineering industry. Within the trade union movement the move from the engineering craft tradition to the new unionism was occasioned by the collapse of the trade unions in the 1920s and the division of the labour movement helped to ensure the depoliticisation of the new unions. Further local study is needed to see how the Coventry experience compared with other localities.

Postscript. Since this thesis was completed, some papers of the late W.H. Stokes have been presented to the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick by Dr. R. Croucher. They include further papers on the Coventry branch of the Minority Movement, which was set up in 1924, and not in 1925 as this thesis states.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union.
ASE	Amalgamated Society of Engineers.
AST	Amalgamated Society of Toolmakers.
ASW	Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers.
B.S.A.	Birmingham Small Arms Co.Ltd.
BSMW	Birmingham Operative Tinsplate, Sheet Metal Workers and Braziers Society.
BSP	British Socialist Party.
BTH	British Thomson Houston Co. Ltd.
CDEEA	Coventry and District Engineering Employers' Association.
CEJC	Coventry Engineering Joint Committee.
CP	Communist Party.
CP (BSTI)	Communist Party (British Section of the Third International)
CUWC	Coventry Unemployed Workers Committee - sometimes called the Central Unemployed Workers Committee.
DC	District Committee.
DORA	Defence of the Realm Act.
EC	Executive Committee (Executive Council in the case of ASE/AEU)
EEF	Engineering Employers' Federation.
ETU	Electrical Trades Union.
GEC	General Electric Company Ltd.
ILP	Independent Labour Party.
IRA	Irish Republican Army.
LRC	Labour Representation Committee.
MDT	Midland Daily Telegraph.
MM	Minority Movement.
NAC	National Administrative Council.
NALGO	National and Local Government Officers.
NFDDSS	National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers.
NFWW	National Federation of Women Workers.
NUR	National Union of Railwaymen.
NUSMWB	National Union of Sheet Metal Workers and Braziers.
NUVB	National Union of Vehicle Builders.
ODD	Organising District Delegate.
RCA	Railway Clerks' Association.
RILU	Red International of Labour Unions.

SEMS	Steam Engine Makers' Society.
SDF	Social Democratic Federation.
SLP	Socialist Labour Party.
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union.
TUC	Trades Union Congress.
UMWA	United Machine Workers' Association.
UPA	United Patternmakers Association.
WU	Workers' Union.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A Primary Sources

- I Manuscript Sources
- II Printed Sources
- III Newspapers and Journals
- IV Government Publications
- V Books and Periodicals
- VI Interviews

B Secondary Sources

- VII Articles
- VIII Unpublished works
- IX Theses
- X Books

All printed matter in Sections V, VII, and X is published in London except otherwise stated.

A Primary Sources

I Manuscript Sources

- (a) Coventry Council Sources at the Coventry City Record Office.
 Coventry City Council Minutes 1915-1939.
 Higher Education Sub-Committee Minute Books 1919-1939
 Housing Committee Minutes 1915-1939
 Housing Committee Papers
 General Strike Papers
 Coventry Union Board of Guardians Minute Books 1919-1923
 and 1925-1926.
 Foleshill Union Board of Guardians Minute Books 1915-1928
- (b) Coventry Council Sources at the Coventry and Warwickshire Collection,
 Coventry Reference Library.
 Education Committee Minute Books 1915-1923
 Juvenile Choice of Employment Sub-Committee Minute Books,
 1920-1936.
 Coventry Employment Exchange: Monthly Unemployment Figures,
 1930-1926.
- (c) Other local sources (and their locations)
 ASE Coventry District Committee Minute Books 1907-1920
 AEU Coventry District Committee Minute Books 1920-1939.
 AEU Lock-out Committee Minutes 1922.

AEU Shop Stewards Meetings Minutes 1920-1922.
 (all at Coventry AUEW District Office)
 Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft Dispute Committee Minutes 1928.
 (property of R.Taylor).
 Coventry and District Engineering Employers' Association
 Executive Committee Minutes 1920-1939.
 Coventry and District Engineering Employers' Association Papers.
 (Both at the Offices of the CDEEA)
 Coventry Borough Labour Party Women's Section; Central Committee
 and All Saints Ward Committee Minute Books 1932-1939.
 Coventry Minority Movement District Committee Minutes 1925-1930.
 (both at the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick)
 Coventry Co-operative Society, Committee of Management Minute
 Books 1918-1927.
 (Coventry Co-operative Society Management Board Offices)
 Coventry Liberal Association Minute Books 1912-1929.
 Coventry Liberal Association Municipal Committee Minute Book
 1909-1924.
 (Both at Coventry City Record Office)
 Midland Union of Conservative and Unionist Association Papers.
 (Conservative Party Office, Leamington Spa)
 Nalco Coventry Branch General Committee Minutes 1921-1940.
 (Coventry Nalco Office)
 National Council of Aircraft Workers; *Coventry and District Local*
Committee Minutes 1936.
 (Property of A. Hicken)
 NUSMWB Coventry Branch Minute Books 1912-1936.
 (NUSMWB Coventry Office)
 Coventry Socialist and Labour Movement Essays; Reminiscences by
 Coventry Labour leaders.
 (Coventry and Warwickshire Collection, Coventry Reference Library)
 TGWU Area Committee Minutes 1931-1939.
 (TGWU Regional Office, Birmingham)
 Trades Council Papers, including a paper by Bill Buxton on the
 General Strike in Coventry.
 (Coventry Trades Council Secretary)
 TUC General Strike File on Coventry.
 (TUC Library, London)

- (d) Public Record Office Sources.
- Cabinet Papers; CAB 24 GT Papers 1918-1922, Reports on Revolutionary Organisations and Labour Reports.
 - Board of Education Papers; ED21 Elementary Schools Files ED 35, ED 53, Secondary School Files, plus other papers with Coventry references.
 - Board of Trade Papers; BT 70 Factory Dept. Reports.
 - Ministry of Housing and Local Government Papers; HLG 47 Housing Scheme and HLG 5 County Hall Papers.
 - Ministry of Munitions Papers; T 163 Report on General Strike by Chief Civil Commissioner.

II Printed Sources (and their locations)

ASW Annual Reports 1921-1939.
 (TUC library)
 Communist Party Reports of National Congresses 1924-1938.
 (Marx Memorial Library, London)
 E.W. Cooper, Sixty Years Reminiscences: The Autobiography of a Cycle Trade Pioneer (collection of newspaper cuttings).
 (Coventry and Warwickshire Collection, Coventry Reference Library)
 Coventry Council Annual Health Reports 1914-1939.
 Coventry Council Annual Reports of School Medical Officer 1915-1938.
 Coventry Council Annual Education Reports 1921-1928.
 Coventry Council Annual Juvenile Employment Sub-Committee Reports 1915-1916 and 1936-1940.
 Coventry Permanent Economic Building Society Annual Reports 1915-1939.
 (all at Coventry and Warwickshire Collection, Coventry Reference Library)
 Coventry Trades Council Papers and Annual Reports 1913-1915, 1919, 1928, 1930, 1933, 1935-1937.
 (TUC Library)
 Coventry Labour Party Annual Reports 1913-1916.
 (TUC Library)
 Coventry Liberal Association Annual Reports 1911-1914.
 (Coventry City Record Office)
 Labour Party Reports of the Annual Conferences 1914-1940.
 (University of Warwick Library)
 TGWU Minutes and Records of the Proceedings of Biennial Conferences 1923-1939.
 (TUC Library)
 WU Annual Reports 1907, 1909, 1911-1914, 1918, 1921.
 (TGWU Regional Office, Birmingham)

III Newspapers and Journals

All sources are at the British Museum unless otherwise stated.

Coventry Graphic 1911-1921 (Coventry and Warwickshire Collection)
 Coventry Standard (Coventry Evening Telegraph Offices, Leamington Spa)
 Midland Daily Telegraph " " " " " "
 Newspapers cuttings collections; Shop Stewards Strike 1917, Embargo Strike 1918 (Coventry and Warwickshire Collection)

ASE Monthly Journal and Report 1914-1920.
 AEU Monthly Journal and Report 1920-1940.
 Board of Trade Labour Gazette 1914-1918.
 Coventry Co-operative Citizen (supplement of Reynold News) 1936-1940.
 Coventry Searchlight - Organ of Coventry Labour Party 1937-1938.
 Labour Organiser 1925-1928 (University of Warwick Library)
 NUVB Journal and Report 1921-1937.
 Out of Work 1921-1923.
 The Call 1918-1920.
 The Communist 1920-1923.
 The Socialist 1919-1920.
 The Worker 1926-1929 (Marx Memorial Library)
 Solidarity 1917-1921.
 Workers Life 1927-1929.
 Workers Weekly 1923-1927.
 Workers' Union Record 1916-1922 (TUC Library)

Coventry Engineering Society Journal 1919-1939.
 Proceedings of the Institution of Automobile Engineers 1916-1939.
 (both at Warwick University Library)
 The Alfred Herbert News 1926-1939.
 The Wheatsheaf - Coventry Co-operative Society Journal 1925-1934.
 (Coventry and Warwickshire Collection)

IV Government Publications

Atkins Report 1919.
 Board of Education Lists; 45, 46, 61, 62, 65.
 Report of the Committee on Education for the Engineering Industry 1931.
 Report by HM Inspector on Day Classes for Engineering Apprentices 1928.
 Statistics of Urban Public Libraries in England and Wales 1933.
 Survey of Public Health Services 1931.
 Local Government Financial Statistics, England and Wales 1934-1937.
 Rates and Rateable Values, England and Wales 1921-1939.

V Books, Articles and Pamphlets

H. Begbie, Living Water, 1913.
 G.D.H. Cole, Labour in Wartime, 1915.
 " " Trade Unionism and Munitions, 1923.
 " " Workshop Organisation (Oxford), 1923.
 Coventry Co-operative Society, Jubilee History 1867-1916, (Coventry) 1919.
 T. Dingley (pamp) The Shop Stewards and Workers Committee Movement, (Coventry) 1918.
 G.S. Davison, At the Wheel, 1931.
 E.E.F., Decisions of Central Conference, 1926.
 A. Gleason (ed.) What the Workers Want (New York), 1920.
 W. Hannington, Unemployed Struggles, 1936.
 " The Rights of Engineers, 1944.
 " Never on Our Knees, 1967.
 J.B. Priestley, English Journey, 1934.
 C. Saunders, Seasonal Variations in Employment, 1936.
 F.G. Woolard, "Some Notes on British Methods of Continuous Production," Proceedings of the Institute of Automobile Engineers, 1924-1925, p.419.
 M.L. Yates, Wages and Labour Conditions in British Engineering, 1937.

VI Interviews

All recorded 1972/73.

S. Conn.
 N. Edwards.
 R. Glover.
 A. Hicken.
 G. Hodgkinson.
 C. Taylor.
 R. Taylor.
 W. Warman.
 C. and C. Wilson.

B SECONDARY SOURCES

VII Articles

- D.H. Aldcroft, "Economic Growth in Britain in the Inter-War Years: A Reassessment." Economic History Review, Vol.XX No.2, 1967.
- D.H. Aldcroft, "Economic Progress in Britain in the 1920s." Scottish Journal of Political Economy, November 1966.
- D.H. Aldcroft, "The Performance of the British Machine-Tool Industry In the Inter-War Years," Business History Review, Vol.XV No.3 1966.
- K. Biggs, "Coventry and the Shop Stewards' Movement, 1917," Marxism Today, January 1969.
- J.L. Marshall, "Patterns of Housebuilding in the Inter-War Period in England and Wales," Scottish Journal of Political Economy, Vol.15 No. 2, June 1968.
- W.R. Morris, "Policies that have Built the Morris Business," Journal of Industrial Economics, Vol.II, No.3, 1954.
- S.B. Saul, "The Motor Industry in Britain to 1914" Business History, Vol 5, 1962-63.
- W.B. Stephens and J.C. Lancaster, "Crafts and Industries," in W.B. Stephens, ed. A History of the County of Warwick, Vol.8 1969.

VIII Unpublished Works

- A. Clinton, Draft History of Coventry Trades Council.
- G. Firth, Coventry: An Educational Survey 1902-1958.
- W.H. Oliver, A Century of Effective Administration: The Achievement of the Coventry and District Co-operative Society Ltd., 1867-1967.

IX Theses

- F.W. Carr, "The Formation of the Communist Party in Coventry" (Warwick M.A. dissertation, 1970)
- R. Croucher, "Communist Politics and Shop Stewards in Engineering 1935-46." (Warwick Ph.D. thesis, 1977)
- J.W. Docking, "The Development of Church of England Schools in Coventry," (Leeds M.Ed. dissertation, 1966)
- G.L. Marson, "Coventry, A Study in Urban Geography," (Liverpool M.A. thesis, 1949)
- R.F. Prosser, "Coventry, A Study in Urban Continuity," (Birmingham M.A. thesis, 1955.)
- P. Searby, "Weavers and Freemen in Coventry, 1820-1861," (Warwick Ph.D. thesis, 1972.)

X Books

- B.W. Alford, Depression and Recovery? British Economic Growth 1918-1939, 1972.
- G.C. Allen, The Industrial Development of Birmingham and the Black Country, 1966.
- P.W. Andrews and E. Brunner, The Life of Lord Nuffield, (Oxford) 1955.
- Armstrong-Siddeley Ltd., The Evening and the Morning, (Coventry) 1957.
- A.L. Chapman and R. Knight, Wages and Salaries in the United Kingdom 1920-1938, (Cambridge), 1953.
- D.C. Coleman, Courtaulds; An Economic and Social History, 2 vols. 1969.

- J. Corbett, The Birmingham Trades Council 1866-1966, 1966.
- B.B. Gilbert, British Social Policy 1914-1939, 1970.
- J. Hinton, The First Shop Stewards' Movement, 1973.
- G. Hodgkinson, Sent to Coventry, 1970.
- W. Hornby, Factories and Plant (History of the Second World War), 1958.
- R. Hughes, The Wooden Shepherdess, 1973.
- R. Hyman, The Workers' Union (Oxford), 1971.
- J.B. Jefferys, The Story of the Engineers, 1946.
- A.T. Kidd, (comp.) History of Tin Plate Workers and Sheet Metal Workers and Braziers Societies, 1949.
- A. Marsh, Industrial Relations in Engineering, 1965.
- S. Melman, Decision-Making and Productivity, (Oxford), 1958.
- A. Muir, 75 Years; A Record of Progress, (Coventry), 1958.
- R. McKibbin, The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924 (Oxford), 1974.
- G. Oliver, The Rover, 1971.
- S. Pollard., The Development of the British Economy, 1969.
- J.M. Prest, The Industrial Revolution in Coventry, (Oxford), 1960.
- B. Pribicevic, The Shop Stewards Movement and Workers Control 1910-1922, (Oxford), 1959.
- K. Richardson, Twentieth Century Coventry, 1972.
- H.W. Richardson and D.H. Aldcroft, Building in the British Economy Between the Wars, 1968.
- B. Simon, The Politics of Educational Reform, 1920-1940, 1974.
- F. Smith, Coventry, Six Hundred Years of Municipal Life, (Coventry), 1945.
- B. Tripp, Renold Chains, 1956.
- G. Turner, The Leyland Papers, 1971.
- S. Yates, Pioneers to Power, (Coventry), 1950.